



Going FAST - When Scrum is slowing you down

PER BEINING, XPand

What can you do when Scrum isn't doing what it used to do? I invite you inside my story of how I guided 16 people in 2 Scrum Teams to overcome some of the Scrum limitations by replacing it with the Agile Scaling framework: FAST Agile.

I'll share how we as a Collective were Self-organising around work, in ways most Agile teams dream of. And hope you end up being inspired, on how you and your current Scrum Team(s), could take a step up the Agile and Adaptive maturity ladder.

1. INTRODUCTION

"This is Science Fiction! It will never work!". That was my first thought and reaction towards FAST Agile, back in 2018, when Ron Quartel, the creator of FAST, gave me a quick introduction. Kind of the same reaction I got from customers, 20 years back, when trying to convince them about the benefits of working Agile. Since my initial response, I've taken FAST Agile for a real test run. And it's not Science Fiction. It works. And it works really well.

This Experience report will tell my story of learnings, reflections, and mistakes, from guiding two Scrum Teams of 16 people to work within the FAST Agile framework, on a project with a tight deadline.

The situation was that the structures and elements of Scrum – that I've loved over the years – were becoming what was slowing us down. So, a new approach for working Agile and adaptive, needed to come into play.

Spoiler Alert: we delivered - and it worked. And I, and most people involved, would argue it was due to an even split between the great people involved and the elements of the FAST framework, supporting them.

2. BACKGROUND

In 2020 I was working in a company, as a Scrum Master for two teams. Our main responsibility was to move an ERP system, with a two-figure number of standalone installations, from an in-house hosted solution to one in the Cloud. With every feature and configuration being re-implemented. And educate the end users using it. When I joined the project had been in the making for more than a year.

We've been running Scrum successfully for quite some time. And were quite good at it. Close to complete transparency. A more than decent predictability. Continuously reflecting and improving. Both teams were in a Performing state (RE: Tuckman's model). And Psychological safety was also fine.

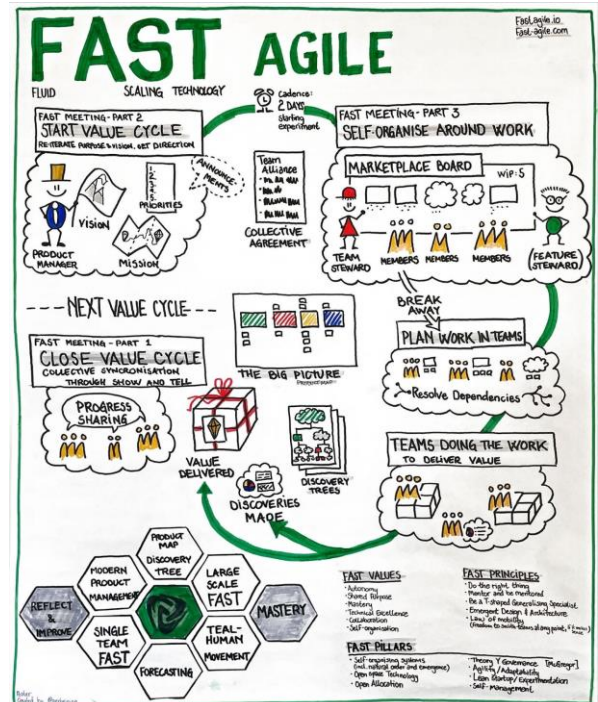


Figure 1. FAST Agile overview

The Product Owner had a fair amount of experience in the role and was at a place where he was doing an outstanding job; Not afraid of making decisions, and with a preference for involving, co-creating and deciding together with the team members.

Everyone was highly competent within their field of expertise (most with two figured years of work experience). Only exception was a small group of 3 developers that had the status of junior developers (recently moved up from trainee status). Towards helping others and being helped, everyone was somewhat open.

We definitely had clarity towards what we were going to do: Get the first financial service centre on the new cloud-based platform with functionality similar to the old system.

Looking at Lt. David Marquets model for Optimal work environment: we were at the sweet spot, balancing control and competence&clarity. Or looking at Henrik Kniberg’s “Alignment vs Autonomy”-grid, we were highly aligned and had a high level of distributed authority. In other words: we had the control to make the decisions towards functionality and how we were working within the Scrum framework.

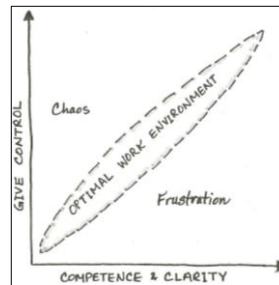


Figure 2.
Optimal work environment

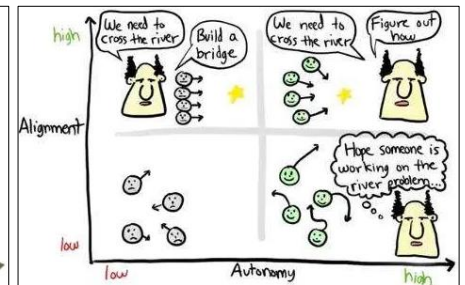


Figure 3.
Alignment vs Autonomy

3. THE PROBLEM - WHY CHANGE WHEN IT'S NOT BROKEN...

My story starts 6 weeks before our first make-or-break deadline. The first of many launches, on a new platform. We hadn't released anything yet. And hadn't shown the Business and sponsors, that the ERP system was able to deliver what was promised.

We were at a meeting, and the Teams and the Product Owner were looking at what work remained before going live. With 2-week sprints, there were 3 sprints until Launch. Only 3 sprints to deliver the remaining work and find a way to divide what was left to do, between the 2 teams.

The frustration, amongst some of the team members, was growing, and could be summarised as follows:

- **Amount of remaining work compared to time left**
Was there too little time or too much work? Or just enough of both? How to split it between the 2 teams and 16 people was a puzzle. Some of the team members voiced that it was tight but possible while others almost panicked with “it cannot be done”.
- **Too long iterations in combination with new things were learned on a daily basis**
Some team members voiced that the current 2-week sprint was too long a planning horizon: especially because new work, unforeseen things along with better ways of solving problems were emerging daily. We had a high level of clarity towards our objective(s) and purpose. But when it came to clarity on the detailed level, this was not shared by the two teams.
- **Competence pool was split between two separated teams**
The team members were also arguing that dividing the work between the two teams was not possible. Both teams needed the competence of everyone from their own team - and also the expertise from the other team - to succeed delivering the remaining work. Some were also voicing that they for a long time had missed pairing up to work and learn from people from the other team (FAST principle of “Mentor and Be mentored”). The current 2 team structure was feeling too rigid.

The situation was becoming clear to me as the Scrum Master: It was the structures and elements of Scrum – that I've loved over the years – that were becoming what was slowing us down. Or even hindering us from delivering on time.

So, a new approach for working Agile and Adaptive, needed to come into play.

Who is telling this story?

Ups, forgot to introduce myself. So, let's Pause the Story for just a few seconds.

Well, I'm Per Beining. Or PerB as I and others often refer to me. I'm 53 years old. Danish. As originating from Denmark (not being a piece of pastry ;).

I've been working with Agile and Adaptive mindset and teams since 2000'ish, when I first read Kent Beck's XP book: eXtreme Programming - Explained. And tried that out as part of a small Tel-Co start-up. Working with Scrum since 2005'ish. Present days, my job-title or job-role, as a consultant, often rhymes with: Scrum Master, Agile Coach or Team Developer. If we've met at a Conference, a Coach Camp or a Training session, I'm the tall, almost bald, glass wearing energy filled Dane, jumping around and probably singing a song, while people are HUMM'ing along. If that doesn't ring a bell, we probably haven't met ... yet.

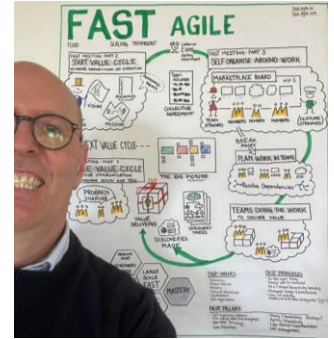


Figure 4. PerB - me - the author

4. THE STORY

Ok, let's return to the story. The situation was not ideal. Perhaps from a change and learning perspective. But not from a discovery and delivery perspective (with a tight deadline).

The initial step: Deciding on FAST as a way to better do our work

Since Ron introduced me to FAST, I had tried out bits and pieces of it, with the teams I was working with. And most of the experiments had been successful. Perhaps the solution to our challenge was straightforward, we just needed to move FAST forward (pun intended ;)

I explained FAST Agile to the Product Owner. And after a few minutes of questions from him and answers from my side, he concluded: "Sounds great! I trust you! Let's do it!". And so we did.

First, we gave the team a 5 minute ultra-fast inflight to FAST Agile. And declared that everyone was now part of one and only one, united Collective of people. And was going to work within the FAST Agile framework.

[Week 1] Saying goodbye - Step 1 - 1 hour FAST Agile Intro

Shortly after the 5-minute ultra-fast intro, we gathered the whole Team for a 1 hour FAST Agile introduction. Explaining a tiny bit more in details about the elements and mechanics of the Framework:

- *Open Space Marketplace*
The way we were going to plan our 2-day iterations (called Value Cycles in FAST) was by using Open Space Technology (OST). In short Open Space, is all about gathering people in one big group. Pitch for each other - in a Market Place setup - what we think needs to happen...
- *Open Allocation and Self-Management*
...and then Self Organise around the work (in a way where no one is telling others what they should do). Let everyone self-manage how work is done for the 2-day Value Cycle.
- *Visualise work*
A Big Picture of the work that needed to happen, was already in place and had been part of our ways of working for the past many months.
- *Scrum vs FAST*
We also High-lighted the differences between how we used to work in Scrum and how that would be different in a 2 day FAST powered Value cycle.

[Week 1] Saying goodbye - Step 2 - Farewell Retrospective

We closed our last Scrum Sprint, with a Retrospective called: "Farewell to the old ways of working - and hello to a new way of doing things". In small groups we answered the questions:

- What's good about the new approach?
- What am I concerned about?
- What am I looking forward to?
- What am I fearing a bit

That way everyone was aware of where we as a group was thinking (revealing the system to itself). What fears, doubts and concerns we had. And what possibilities was laying in front of us.

[Week 1] Saying goodbye - Step 3 - Quick intro: Tips on Time (and Focus) Management

We as individuals and as a Collective were heading towards a different way of working. Very different timewise. So, I decided to give the team a few of my best Ninja Trips and tricks on personal Time and Focus Management:

- *Daily Highlights - tweet from this afternoon*
Start the day by writing a Post It note with the highlights of my day. One sentence or 3 prioritised bullet points. Written in language as if it was a postcard to myself send from this afternoon.
- *60-90 min focus (be aware and plan day accordingly)*
Science shows that our bodies have peaks and valleys when it comes to energy. They are for each of us of a consistent but individual length. By noticing them, you can plan your work optimally and when to replenish energy.
- *Rule of Stuckness – ask for help after max 1 hour*
As a rule of thumb: if you are stuck for more than one hour, you need somehow to involve a friend.
- *Trust your gut*
Are you in doubt - trust what your gut tells you - it's typically right.
- *Evaluate continuously*
Evaluate how far you have come with the task you are working on. What results did you expect to have after spending 25%, 50% and 75% - and are the results similar to the progress. Should you reach out to other teammates and ask for help or support? Can you work smarter? Evaluate continuously!

What was already there?

I'll pause the story once more.

Sharing this story with others, one question that always pops up, is: "What are the prerequisites to start working FAST?". I would say "None!". But if you rephrase the question to: "What did you have in place beforehand, to make the transition from Scrum to FAST easier?", the answer is probably more useful for you as a reader, should you consider moving into working FAST.

We had the following artefacts:

- *Collective Agreement (We called it a "Team Alliance / Team Agreement")*
Our rules for how we self-manage around Harmony, Psychological safety and how we want to be together and treat each other. How we make decisions, resolve conflict and change the Agreement.
- *Big Picture (We called it an "EPIC Backlog")*
Our "Big Picture" was showing the bigger chunks of work, in a prioritized sequence.
We created The Big Picture approx. 6 months before going FAST, to help us keep an overview of the work laying ahead of us.
It also showed dependencies to other teams, that was not part of our Collective and our FAST experiment (5 other teams were working on elements of the IT platform and infrastructure of the new system).
- *A more detailed overview (epics broken down into stories)*
Containing guesstimates on effort. Dependencies. All spread out on a calendar view - with quick best guesses, towards what value cycle we expected to do the work in.
- *Feature Stewards*
A feature steward is a Team Members volunteering to steward a feature. Her primary responsibility is to make sure things are discovered and refined enough, ready for the actual work on the Feature.
Some weeks before going FAST, we introduced the concept of Feature Stewards (at the time we called them EPIC Owners).
- *Discovery Work in different formats (but no Discovery Trees)*
FAST is offering, in addition to The Big Picture, to work with Discovery Trees to give an overview of Discovery work, to help focus on having enough work ready for execution in a timely manner that does not create too much waste.
We managed to work without Discovery Trees - by having Feature Stewards.
The Feature stewards decided autonomously how they wanted to represent the discovery work. They did it in different ways, depending on the feature, The discovery work was pitched at the Marketplace and the Collective self-organised around it. Making it happen in due time - like all other work.

[Week 1] Start Value Cycle #1 - First FAST Meeting

We kicked off our very first FAST Meeting (the only meeting in FAST) by gathering everyone in the Collective around the Big Picture and having the Product Owner briefly explain what our Vision and Objective was.

We also looked at our more detailed Storyboard. This board visually showed the smaller chunks of functionality that our EPIC was split into.

Next someone from the Collective (Feature Stewards) pitched from the top, in prioritised order, what they were hoping to achieve within this first 2-day Value Cycle. Some were kindly asking others to join that work. The rest self-organised around what work made sense to them.

[Week 1] End Value Cycle #1 - Reflect & Improve: Different formats and approaches

FAST is not prescriptive on how to Reflect and Improve and recommends experimenting and discovering what works best.

We tried out a couple of different approaches, where we ended our Value Cycles with a Reflect & Improve session.

- *Quick Retrospectives*

The first couple of weeks we did a quick 15min version of our previous Scrum Retrospective:

KEEP - TRY - WISH (with dot-voting for the top2/top3 of TRYs and the WISHes)

- KEEPs - what work and we should continue doing
- TRYs - Tangible actions/experiments that we would like to try out
- WISHes - something outside our power - where we need help from someone

- *Planned vs. Actuals*

We also tried to start the Value Cycle, by writing down on the left side of a Post It note, what you intend to get done. End the cycle with writing down on the right side of the same Post It note, what actually happened. And reflect alone and with others on how to have the two sides become closer to each other.

- *4 Week Retrospectives*

After 4 weeks of working together within the FAST frame, we did a more traditional Retrospective. We were getting close to the deadline, and collectively we had confidence that we could deliver on time towards the upcoming deadline.

First question on the agenda was: "Should we continue doing FAST?"

9 out of 11 voted "YES", 2 were blank and 0 for "NO". The Collective were getting everything out of FAST that we were dreaming of. We continued with a KEEP, TRY and WISH to flesh out more details. With the addition of an extra element: "What Didn't work that well". That spawned a few tweaks to how we in details did things. One was to shift the length of our Value Cycles to 2,5 day (every week same cadence).

[Week 6] Launch - still working within the FAST Agile frame and dealing with Bugs

A couple of weeks later, we launched on time: we had a live system with real users.

The Value cycles leading up to Launch, had a few new types of activities like Training of end-user and Launch/Release activities, they all found their way to the pitches of the Market Place, and was done like all other work, by people self-organising around it.

In the days following the Launch, we did value cycles of 0,5 or 1 day - kind of a "Task-force-mode"-like setup. Focus was on stabilising the launched system. All done in the Marketplace format we've grown used to.

We used a Kanban board for visualising what was Work-in-Progress and what was the next most important critical issues or bug to focus on. We did that for a couple of days and then the Collective decided to revert to working in 2,5-days Value Cycles.

After a couple of Value Cycles, the system was so stable, that the Features for the next phase/release of the Project, was introduced one by one, by the Feature Stewards, as capacity became available. Our ways of working quickly went back into life, as it was before the Launch.

Life continued with FAST over the next couple of months.

There were summer holidays. And I was amazed how well FAST, with our cadence of now 2,5 days Value Cycles, was serving the day-to-day urgent operational needs for the running system, along with working on the next features to be implemented, all while people were switching between being away on vacation.

After 3 months of Working with FAST, we had a high level Reflect and Improve session / Retrospective, where it was a close tie between FAST and 1w Scrum. 8 voted for FAST. 7 for Scrum. None voted for KanBan or 2-week Scrum.

After 4 months of doing FAST, I left the team.

I've since heard that the new Scrum Master and the Collective decided to go back to Scrum.

I wasn't there, and don't have all the details, so I won't speculate into the reasoning behind (in this report).

5. TO SUM IT ALL UP: WHAT I LEARNED

My experience can on a high-level be summarised into one sentence (or just 2 words): "FAST works!" And as you can read from my story, FAST solved the initial Challenges we were facing with the tight deadline, fluidly allocating team competence where needed and finding a way through a highly complex problem.

My biggest Learning Points can be listed as

- *Let the Collective Intelligence deal with Complex work*
Over the years, working with various Agile methods and frameworks, I've been consistently impressed by what groups of people can accomplish when given the right environment, structure and perhaps a bit of well-planned facilitation.
What I've seen with FAST beats that. Especially Open Space and the structure of having people self-organise around work and self-manage on how to solve work, was nothing but impressive.
- *Product Discovery is a natural element of FAST – use it to its full extent!*
While working in an agile manner with many teams, I've noticed that initially, not many people seem energized by discovery work. So, I was impressed by how discovery work was naturally being taken into the marketplace and how people were doing discovery work to a level of "enough". Ensuring that there was enough "ready" work to be done in the coming value cycle(s).
Compared to a lot of other Agile Framework - like Scrum and Kanban - FAST is by design, built to deal not only Product Delivery (producing features) but also Product Discovery. A really big differentiator with the extended focus on Product Management, that I see in high performance companies.
- *Feature Stewards to drive Discovery Work / Product Discovery*
Discovery work was as mentioned, happening almost by itself. I also credit this to the accountability of the Feature Stewards. Having a member of the Collective to steward the Discovery work, of value giving Features, made things so much smoother compared to my old experience of a Product Owner or a Business Analyst doing or driving the work. This is particularly true in combination with the fluid allocation of skills resulting from people self-selecting their work at the Marketplace. People were naturally volunteering to take part in the Discovery work when the Feature in question resonated with them. And notice: you can implement this concept, within any type of Agile process. Just do it!
- *Using FAST to Scale*
My experience of successfully scaling within Agile, has been limited. Mostly because SAFe and multi team Scrum has a lot of build in limitations. Using FAST for scaling many people, has made me believe in Scaling again.
We added one extra person while working FAST. And I have no doubt that if many more people should have been onboarded, that all would have been done in the same rocket-speed onboarding that happened. Let people help people. And pitch it as an any other element in the Open Space.
- *Rule of Stuckness - ask for help after max 1 hour*
I also noticed that the rule made big difference for everyone, on elements like building and strengthening relationships, Psychological safety and especially on eliminating waste. Members were asking for help, like I've never seen before. And Pair work was definitely also more common than I've seen previously.

Ok. It all sounds like FAST is Poster Perfect and a "silver bullet"-solution to whatever is wrong with Scrum and all other Agile and Adaptive approaches that are out there. It probably isn't. One thing that it is, is highly adaptive, forcing you to not just do what the guide says.

In retrospective: What was difficult? What could and would I have done differently, with my current knowledge.

- *Getting Organisational buy in*
As mentioned in the introduction, we had a high degree of control in regard to what we were allowed process wise to autonomously to change. So going from Scrum to FAST was a decision made on the Team. In many organisations, that would be a centralised decision. And convincing people that have only seen or just heard of Scrum, that the Open Space marketplace is a fantastic way to plan - sounds like Science Fiction. Does it sound like chaos, to set people free and letting them autonomously decide for themselves what to do? I've had that limitation in my mind. You as the reader – what are your thoughts?
So before switching to fast – I would with my newfound knowledge in those types of organisations, probably start by using the Open Space Technology (for eg. department or company activities). Raising the organisational collective intelligence towards OSTs powerful way to help people collaborate, self-organise and self-manage.

And on a team level, you could split the Sprints into smaller Value Cycles – and then adhere to both Organisational governance (of a specific framework) and going FAST.

- *Reflect and Improve. More focus on how and when to reflect and improve*
I truly believe that Reflect & Improve is a core element of any high performing healthy team.
I was highly influenced by how we did retrospectives when running Scrum. Today, I would be more reflective about when we as a Collective should have a Reflect & Improve event. And would guide and inspire the Teams in ways they on a daily basis could do the same.
I would try to inspire the self-organising Teams to use Woody Zuill's daily habit of "Turn up the good". It's when the team daily reflects 5 min. together on "what went well....and how can we do more of that tomorrow". Simple and effective.
Having more focus on when we as a Collective need to Reflect and Improve is also one of my learnings. Not just do it by autopilot, like we did every Value Cycle or every 4 weeks. Use it to deliberately help (or inspire) the Collective to grow, remove waste and deliver more value.
- *Guide and help people to talk with each other – while not stealing their own learnings*
The promise is that the collective members self-organise around work. Great! Fantastic! If people though are used to work in a "Feature factory"-setup, where the Scrum Sprint Planning event is used to hand out work to individuals, it's hard as an individual to break the antipattern of "I'm-doing-my-work". We experienced that the self-organised team forgot to coordinate and hadn't anything coherent to show. At the end of the Value Cycle. Great learning opportunity for everyone. Following this everyone had high focus on collaborating towards delivering finished work at the end of the Value cycles. And preparing for sharing their progress in a tangible way.
- *Stop controlling: Trust the process - trust the people - trust yourself and have focus on "holding the space"*
"Will this work?" was initially my biggest doubt. Today I would take a lot more laid-back stance and trust the process. I would Observe more. Listen. Think. Think a bit more. And then ask people - if it's working or not. And then guide them into change. What I saw, most of the time, was them just doing it themselves. As a facilitator, remember to be present, observant and "holding the space". Don't jump in too soon. And don't wait too long. The "knowing when" is the difficult part. I was reminded over these first couple of Marketplaces, that people are totally capable of naturally self-organisation around work ...
- *Bottlenecks and dependencies surface faster and becomes clearer much earlier*
There is a big difference between working in in 2 days Value and a 2-week Sprint. We quickly discovered that any undetected dependency or bottleneck, was hindering us from finishing our planned work. During one of the first Value Cycles, we had a blocking error in our build and release environment, affecting everyone. Quickly almost half of the Collective re-organised to solve it. With clear reference to the FAST Principle "Law of mobility" those that could help was involved. Over the 4 months this happened several times in more areas: People, Environments, Test Data and Process.
- *"If you build it - they will come"*
Collective intelligence is impressive. When you give people the clarity towards what direction is desired along with a clear understandable structure to act within, they will fill the "field of dreams" and get things done. All by themselves. So, my only personal regret is that I didn't try out with FAST as a whole, sooner than I did. And happy that I used all possible opportunities to try out different elements of FAST.

So was it Scrum that was slowing us down or the way we were using the Scrum Framework. Arguments can be made for both. A lot of what I've described, probably COULD be tweaked to work in a Scrum frame. Theoretically everything is possible. BUT I don't see it out there. Only bits and pieces in glimpses. And never to full extent. Will I use FAST again? Absolutely! At every possibility that I get. And should you try it out or have questions, feel free to reach out: I would love to hear about what worked for you. What was hard. And your solutions for that.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all the great people that were part of this experience of working within the FAST Agile frame. Thanks for the constructive review comments; Olivier Gourment, Luxshan Ratnaravi and Christian Gram. Thank you, Mia Kolmodin, for Shepherding me with your fantastic insights: I couldn't have done it without you!

REFERENCES

- ⇒ To learn more about Scaling with FAST Agile - take a look The FAST Guide: <https://www.fastagile.io/fast-guide>
- ⇒ Ron Quartel's ER, from Agile2020: <https://www.agilealliance.org/resources/experience-reports/self-organization-eats-agile-at-scale-for-breakfast/>
- ⇒ And see my YouTube video "FAST Agile – an introduction": [\[video-link\]](#)