How to Be a Stellar Product Owner

written by Manoj Khanna | January 23, 2014
Here's the repost of my recent post on ScrumAlliance.org:

As we get into the routine of releases and sprints, over time the Scrum team establishes its work pattern, and the product owner (PO) becomes more familiar with not only the team but with methods for developing the product build with agility. As we move into sprint after sprint, daily stand-ups, planning, review, and retrospective sessions become second nature for the team. During this process, the PO may feel overwhelmed by the demands of involvement with the team, as well as the demands of external priorities. Some POs may lose their focus on the team as those external priorities shift. To address this and a few other factors that can affect the transition from being an average PO to being a stellar PO, I've listed some traits that can help a PO move in that direction.

A stellar PO makes himself or herself available to the team.

Product ownership is more than just a minor commitment – active participation in team gatherings is essential. A stellar PO must also commit to assisting with the resolution of various impediments affecting the team and with keeping product development on track, which requires more than a fair share of commitment.

Product ownership may be not a full-time job, but it needs sincere, dedicated attention from the PO so that the team gets queries answered and clarified, so they can keep development continuous, without any hiccups.

While the PO makes sure that his or her availability is active

and ongoing for the team, the team should make sure that they respect the PO's time, making productive use of everyone's time during various Scrum ceremonies and activities.

A stellar PO is knowledgeable about the product being developed.

One of the key factors that every PO should know is the organization's end-user market. Without that knowledge, any PO could unintentionally derail the team and lead them in the wrong direction – and on toward failure. The PO must be well versed in each and every end-user requirement.

From the team's perspective, the PO is a powerful and resourceful representative for the business (as it pertains to a specific product within a business unit). As such, a stellar PO should have access to all pertinent information and should have full authority to guide product decisions in the right manner through the various Scrum ceremonies.

The PO represents the business and speaks on behalf of the business – any conflicts or issues encountered during development must be resolved by a single voice in the favor of customer value and end-user benefit.

A stellar PO is empowered.

With two-week sprint cycles, the entire duration is crucial for completing, testing, and potentially shipping the number of stories selected by the team. Since time is of the essence here, it becomes absolutely essential for the PO to respond in a timely manner to all requests for information or clarification that are sent his way by the team. Promptness, being on top of things, and fighting fires for the team is the key to the success of the project.

POs are direct business representatives (at least that's the expectation), and it is expected that part of the PO's role is

to provide ready access to decision makers or influencers. In the absence of such access, crucial development decisions can be delayed and progress slows down – or comes to a halt – as the team struggles with issues that the PO should be able to easily manage. The result is incomplete stories and an unsatisfactory sprint outcome for the end user.

One of the strong traits that a stellar PO exhibits is acting as an advocate for the team. Teams that receive essential and accurate product direction and support build a higher-value business product. The stellar PO should take every opportunity to demonstrate advocacy for the team.

Summary

If you think of the product development cycle as a train, the team is part of the engine and the PO acts as its conductor. As developers move the process forward (acting much like an engine), they improve efficiency with every effort applied to delivery, and they help move the product as directed by their conductor, the PO, according to the defined and accepted stories and requirements. The conductor keeps the product train on track so it reaches every determined station (sprint completion) with the allotted resources and within the set time frames. Both the conductor and the engine must work together to get the product train to the right station with the right requirements and resources, in one piece and on time – each representing half of the equation toward reaching the solution. The PO and the team are core partners on this "journey," and their profit is ultimately measured by building a high-value business product for their customers.