You Have to Say More There: Effective Communication in a Distributed Agile Team

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“Agile Doesn’t Work for Distributed Teams!”

- Truth is at least 50% of all agile teams are distributed
- Agile approaches can help distributed teams deliver
  - Pairs
  - Sustainable pace
  - Fast feedback

Source: https://www.pictofigo.com/image-detail/2650/
Origin of the Book

• We discussed what we’d seen: not much and it was the same old, same old

• We decided to pair-write the book

• We focused on collaboration and role flexibility
Agile Principles Helped Start

• We started Aug 30, 2017.

• We had interruptions for hurricanes and international travel

• Developed a book “frame” (similar to a product skeleton)
Interruptions

- Writing from various locations proved typical distributed team challenges:
  - Insufficient hours of overlap
  - Insufficient infrastructure for audio and video

Source: http://www.afcent.af.mil/News/Artigphoto/2000618148/
Early Timeline

• Wrote first three chapters (simultaneously) Nov-Dec 2017
• Reordered/refactored chapters
• Finished first five chapters in January and February
• Sustainable pace of 1 hour every day, anywhere from 500-1500 words
Learnings Through March

• How to function as a team (pair)
• How to collaborate
• Tools and how to use them
Continuous Integration?

- Had used Google docs as regular text
- Tried various markdown extensions/add-ons
- Changed to writing in Markdown in Google docs and then sweeping to dropbox files for Leanpub
When Could We Work Together?

- Both in Eastern time zone
- Needed to find at least 30 minutes each day
- Normally mornings
- We’re fuzzy in the late afternoons after a full day

Hours of overlap != availability
How We Wrote (Part 1)

• Used a story map for each chapter
• Wrote in sections

• Why do I want to read this?
• What will I learn?
• What will I be able to do that I couldn’t do before?
• Where are we going next?

Map texture source: Ava Verino https://flic.kr/p/85teFF  CC BY 2.0
How We Wrote (Part 2)

"Plan" (as a pair) for up to 5 minutes:
Outline, mind map, research, decide on questions, organize in some way

We often wrote for a 15-minute timebox and then reflected

If you have time for more writing, cycle in this loop

Reflect (as a pair) for 5 minutes:
Possibly cycle, think about the writing, what went well, where we still have puzzles, etc.

No, more to write

Pairing:
1. Write Down! (continue to go forward)
2. Research/Suggest/Help/Clarify

Are you done?

Yes

Edit at the end when the piece is complete.
Backchannel

- Text (SMS)
- Email

6/26/18, 5:01 PM
I’m on...

6/29/18, 2:57 PM
I may be a few minutes late

7/2/18, 8:27 AM
Will be a few minutes late

7/3/18, 8:39 AM
I’m going to assume you are on your boat outing today since it’s past 8:30 am. Enjoy the time. Looking forward to co-writing tomorrow.

We are getting ready to leave. I thought we canceled today?? Argh.
Each Other’s Human Cues

• RCA dog: head cocked, curious look

• Finger on the chin means “I’m thinking”

• “When I’m tired, I’m pretty human”

• “We’re done”

• “The writer/typist/AV engineer/secretary didn’t show up today”
Each Other’s Writing Cues

• “You have to say more about that”
• “Let’s unpack that”
• “Mind if I tweak that?”
• “I’m okay with that”
• “Where are you?”
• XX means fix this later
Our Working Agreements

• Default to writing
• Don’t write over the other person
• If you’re typing, always go forwards
• If you navigate, think clarity, find connections in other parts of book or references, refactor 2nd
• Don’t try to talk and write at the same time
• Change driver and navigator every 5-10 minutes
Results and Learning

• Check in at the start of each session

• Power of a streak

• Declaring done (and moving on)

• Write clean

Photo by Nathan Dumlao on Unsplash
Cadences, Timeboxes, Flow

- We used flow so we didn’t have to batch our planning or retros
- We timeboxed each day’s work
- Replanned when we needed it
  - Plan a chapter with a map
  - Write and review in the small
- Review at the end: did we fulfill the promise in the map?
Writing is an Act of Discovery

• Writing English is similar to writing code

• Clarified and refactored earlier work

Photo by Rachel Pfuetzner on Unsplash
Other Learnings

- Pair-writing might be a simulation for your team’s product development
- Pair-writing is fun, produced a better book than we could solo
- Johanna wishes for a real Markdown tool for pair-writing
- Mark wishes for more experimentation

Photo by Sharon McCutcheon on Unsplash
Distributed Team Learnings

- Need sufficient hours of overlap
- Need experiments
- Flow worked better than batching for us
- Natural communication tools

- Acceptable Hours of Overlap
- Transparency at All Levels
- Culture of Continuous Improvement
- Pervasive Collaboration
- Assume Good Intent
- Project Rhythm
- Resilience through Holistic Culture
- Transparency at All Levels
Where We Are Now

• Need somewhere between two and four chapters to finish.
Let’s Stay in Touch

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