

In Search of Commitment Clarity

by Michele Sliger

“OK, can we all commit to this iteration plan? Let me see your votes. Hold those hands high, please,” Alan said. “Jeff, are you sure you can commit? That’s quite a workload you’ve agreed to take on.”

Alan was new to the team, but he was an old hand at software development and could tell when someone was overcommitting. As an agile project manager, however, he knew it wasn’t his place to dictate workloads.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Jeff replied.

Alan looked around the room at the other team members to see if anyone would voice a concern that perhaps Jeff had taken on too much, possibly putting the team at risk. His eyes met carefully neutral stares. Alan decided to move forward and made a mental note to watch Jeff’s progress closely during the iteration. “All right then, congratulations everyone,” he said. “We’ve just committed to the iteration!”

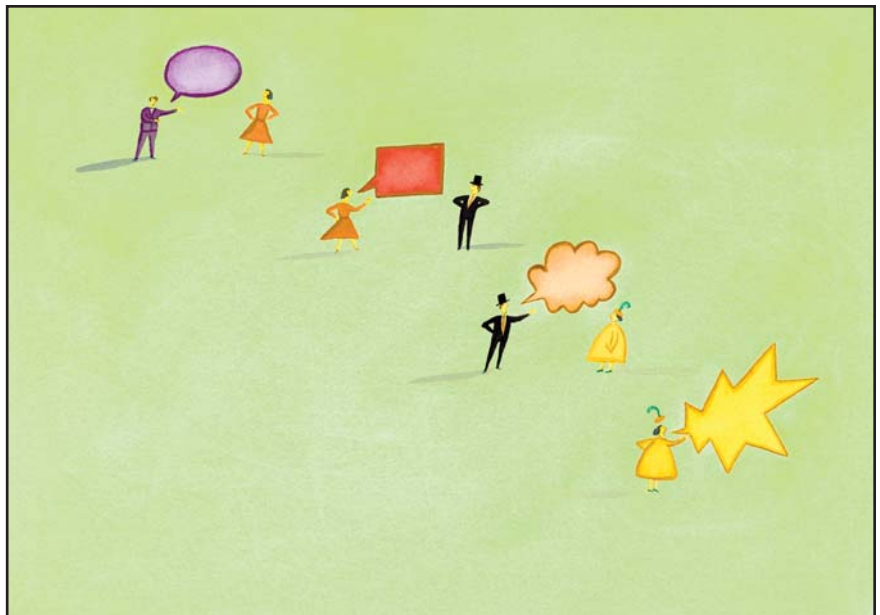
As the iteration progressed it became more obvious that Jeff was working long hours in order to keep his commitments. About halfway through the iteration, Alan invited him for coffee to discuss his concerns.

“Hey, Jeff, I know you’re busy. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I wanted to check in with you to see how you’re doing. I’ve noticed that you’re working some pretty long hours.”

Jeff looked annoyed. “Well, yeah, there’s a lot of work I have to finish. What did you expect?”

“I expected you to say ‘no’ to too much work. Why didn’t you? I know you’re excited by the technical challenges, but you know the work isn’t going away and can be scheduled for future iterations. Why the push to do so much in one iteration?” Alan was genuinely concerned and wanted to understand what was driving Jeff to take on so much.

“We’ll never get the product out the door if I don’t push!” Jeff said. “At least Linda is happy with my work ethic. She told me yesterday how much she appreci-



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ated my efforts!” Linda was the product manager on the team. “Besides, weren’t you the one teaching us last month to say ‘Yes, and . . .’ instead of ‘Yes, but . . .’? And now you’re telling me I should say no, possibly putting our delivery at risk and making Linda and all our customers unhappy? Make up your mind, Alan—do you want me to say yes or no?” Jeff scowled, then focused on his cup and stirred his coffee furiously.

“It sounds like you’re really frustrated with me. I’m sorry if I’ve sent mixed messages. I’d like to try to clarify my meaning,” Alan said and waited for Jeff to nod before continuing. “Saying ‘Yes, and . . .’ instead of ‘Yes, but . . .’ when dialoging is designed for problem solving. It’s a way to embrace new ideas and explore them, rather than dismissing them immediately for all those ‘but’ reasons. It keeps the conversations and brainstorming activities flowing, whereas ‘Yes, but . . .’ responses tend to shut things down. I’ve watched team members practice this in their design discussions, and it looks like it’s working really well. Have you noticed a difference?”

Jeff paused and thought before answering. “Yes, everyone does seem more involved in the discussions now. Even Vijay is speaking up, and he hardly

ever says a word.”

“Yes, I noticed that too. I’m glad you’re all working so well together,” Alan said and smiled. “Saying no is about protecting yourself from overcommitting, and it’s very important. I don’t want you to say ‘Yes and . . .’ when it comes to your personal capacity. What would that sound like? ‘Can you work one hundred hours this week?’ ‘Yes, and . . . I’ll be dead by Friday.’”

Alan laughed, but Jeff managed only a weak smile. “I would much prefer that you respond to these requests with ‘No, I cannot work one hundred hours this week. I can work thirty hours,’” Alan said.

“But what about our delivery date?” Jeff asked, starting to get upset again. “We’ll never get in all the features that Linda wants if I don’t work longer hours.”

“We’ll never get in all the features that Linda wants no matter what we do!” Alan laughed again and then grew serious. “I don’t want us to miss our delivery date either. And we can still make the date, albeit with fewer features. Linda knows about the importance of prioritizing her backlog, and she understands that we can’t do it all. Did you ever think that it might be unfair to Linda and the rest of the team to overcommit yourself like this?”

STORY LINES

- **Consequences of overcommitting** include resentment, burnout, poor product quality, low morale, high turnover, and missed delivery dates.
- **Overcommitting doesn't just put you in a bind**, it puts the rest of the team in a bind as well. Be fair to your team and to your stakeholders, and make every effort to make realistic commitments.
- **Use the review at the end of the iteration to assess whether or not the team overcommitted**, and be sure to scale back your commitments for the next iteration to better reflect reality. This will allow the team to establish a consistent pattern of meeting commitments while working at a sustainable pace.
- **Revisit the release plan at the end of each iteration** to make sure that any change in the team's velocity is accounted for in the overall release plan. It's better to know sooner rather than later if you can't complete all the features originally agreed to.

"Unfair? How?" Jeff asked.

"By overcommitting, you're setting up yourself and the team. Tasks you personally commit to but can't find time for become tasks the rest of the team has to pick up. Now everyone is overworked and tired and unable to think clearly. Mistakes get made, and the team worries about fixing those mistakes. Eventually you'll have to slow down, whether it's because the team will revolt or because there are so many bugs that need fixing. Meanwhile Linda has unrealistic expectations of what we can accomplish, which she passes along to our customers. That puts her in an awkward situation when she realizes that we have a problem. Don't you think it would be better for her to know *now* what we can truly commit to and deliver?"

"You're saying that by personally overcommitting, I'm in effect overcommitting the team, and it will eventually come back on Linda," Jeff reflected.

"Not just on Linda. It's a problem for all of us. Being realistic about how much work you can take on will benefit everyone. To paraphrase Ken Schwaber, a dead team member is a useless team

member." This time Alan and Jeff both laughed. "Jeff, why don't you mull this over for a few days and let me know how I can help."

"I can already tell you how you can help," Jeff replied. "We need to revisit what we committed to for the release. If I'm going to cut back, then we've got to tell Linda. And from what you've said, it sounds like letting her know earlier is best. You know, it *would* be nice to have more time with my family."

"That's great to hear, Jeff. We'll discuss this with the team during our review at the end of the iteration. I'll visit with Linda now and let her know that this is on the agenda, and I'll let the team know about it in our stand-up later today. I'm glad you're willing to revisit the release plan."

"Yes, and I'm hoping that Linda will understand when I say 'no' to too much work. Hey—can I combine a 'Yes and . . .' with a 'no' like that?" Jeff laughed and took a last sip of his coffee.

"Well, Jeff, yes and no."

Alan laughed, and Jeff choked on his coffee. **{end}**

Michele Sliger has worked in software development for more than fifteen years. She currently works as an agile coach for Rally Software Development, training software development teams in agile methodologies. Michele has served as a project manager at Qwest Communications, a consultant for Fortune 500 companies, and was a founding member of the engineering teams at two biotech startups. She is a certified Project Management Professional and Scrum Master. Michele is also an adjunct faculty member of the University of Colorado, where she teaches software project management to graduate engineering students.

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