



Case Study: Dealing with the Unexpected

An Agile coach contacted me to discuss an issue on his team. One of the critical contractors on his team had left the project for another assignment, unexpectedly, on two week's notice, just before an important release. Ouch! The coach described his initial shock and dismay. He wanted ideas for how to handle the unexpected loss of a team member with his team.

Together we developed a list of five actions that would help deal with his situation:

1. The Agile coach could contact the contracting agency to give them feedback on the impact on the project of the abrupt loss of a team member. He could seek an agreement with them to give earlier notice of personnel changes. It would be a good opportunity to let them know what skills and qualities he looks for in future contactors.
2. He could meet with the team to ask team members' for their ideas of how they could still meet their commitments.
3. He could set a time with the Product Owner to recalibrate expectations and let her know the team had developed a plan for dealing with the disruption.
4. If one was needed, he could recruit a replacement. But only if the team thought they could meet their commitments while on-boarding a new team member.
5. He could ask for a team discussion of how individual team member behaviors (like leaving with too little advance notice) impact the team and the project.

Finally, he realized he hadn't yet built "bench strength" in cross-functional skills and knowledge on his team. Losing this team member meant losing critical momentum while someone else got up to speed. The Agile coach decided to assess the "truck factor" risks on his team. Where else was the project vulnerable to the loss of a single team member? What knowledge or skills needed to spread beyond one or two members of the team?

Armed with several alternatives for action, the Agile coach ended our conversation with a comment, "I know the Agile Manifesto values include 'responding to change', but that doesn't mean we're always calm, cool and collected when change comes knocking at the team's door! Now I see that when change happens, it's not a disaster. It's an opportunity to learn how to increase our effectiveness as a team."

---Diana Larsen