

Agile Case Study:

A Simple Exercise That Can Refocus Your Business

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Even the strongest product vision can become distorted when overwhelmed by competing priorities.

This anonymized client success story examines how a simple exercise allowed a once profitable division to regain focus and its dominance. This exercise can be just as effective on a single project or product line.

BACKGROUND:

RSD is one of the research and development arms of a Fortune 100 company. They turn pure science into products that are manufactured on a global scale.

The division had an initiative tied to the growth of autonomous vehicles. They wanted to make driving safer. But RSD had a problem in early 2016; their 2.5 year average development cycle was far too slow to keep up with advancements in the field. This meant their newest offerings would be obsolete before they even entered the market.

The Simple Exercise

One of Scrum Inc.'s principal consultants gathered all of RSD's leadership in a conference room in order to assess the situation. He began by asking the group "to write the name of every single project the division was working on an individual sticky note. Then place them on that wall."

A forest of over one hundred sticky notes soon filled the space.

"Just for fun," the Scrum Inc. consultant then said, "let's put names on all those projects. List who is actually working on them."

Even though they'd assign just a few people per project, the leadership team ran out of names around project number 70.

Clearly - RSD was actively working on far more projects than the division as a whole could ever complete.

"Why are you working on so many things?" our principal consultant asked.

Because Corporate wants us to get more products to market and monetize them quickly was the collective answer.

"Okay," said the Scrum Inc. consultant, "but are any of those 100+ projects getting done? Is anything getting to market?"

There was complete silence.

The Real Problem At RSD

Each individual sticky note represented something to the leaders gathered in that conference room - a priority. And work on priorities must be started as quickly as possible.

The best teams, these leaders also believed, were the ones working on the most projects at any given time. Amount of work underway became more highly prized than actually releasing a product.

RSD's leadership had, inadvertently, incentivized teams to always be starting projects. What they weren't doing was finishing them. They had all these great projects underway but with nothing getting done, RSD's was quickly losing market share to its competitors. What did get out the door was soon cloned by fast follower competition. The division was at serious risk if these patterns weren't resolved.

This is something we see on a regular basis. When Scrum Inc. consultants partner with a company we usually find about 70% of the work being done there does not align with business objectives. Often it's because corporate strategy focuses far too much on what a company will do rather than what a company won't do.

This is one key lesson organizations need to learn to become Agile.

The Fix

In that conference room, RSD's leadership had a realization - not everything was going to get done. Worse, if they continued down the path they were on, nothing would get done.

So they took those 100 projects and started making the hard choices of what they were not going to do and what, instead, they wanted to focus their Teams on. A shift to what would actually make a difference in the market.

And they argued. And lobbied. And they killed their pet projects. And they worked hard doing what leadership really has to do, which is to make choices.

Eventually, the more than 100 priorities were whittled down to 12.

RSD's leaders were strong advocates of making their division Agile. They partnered with Scrum Inc. in order to transform their organization using Scrum@Scale. So one of the first tasks accomplished by their Executive Metascrum Team (EMT) was to make sure each Scrum Team was working on just one project. And teams were given time to finish a project before they started a new one. All this refocused the division on the clear goals shared by the EMT.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

In five Sprints - just ten weeks - RSD saw their productivity double. And they discovered revenue opportunities they never would have before.

In fact, the once stagnant RSD was highlighted by the multinational's CEO who told investors the company was now finding ways to embed data into the reflective paint and tape already ubiquitous on roadways. They could literally pave the way for autonomous vehicles, robots, even traffic cones to warn each other of hazards.

These new products, the CEO stated, are "exactly where the trends are going. And there is a big platform for us to capitalize as we move ahead."