

Getting Agile

4 strategies to bring out the best in your team



Introduction

If you've spent any time kicking around the software development world, you've probably come across the term "Agile." And without any context, you may have assumed this was just another in an endless line of irritating corporate buzzwords and kept right on kicking. But wait! Come back! Agile is actually so much more than just lingo—it's a work philosophy that can radically improve how your team works together.

Agile started as a reaction against the traditional waterfall methodology of delivering software, which favors long release cycles over incremental iterations. Rather than waiting months or years to deliver a full suite of software products (that are often riddled with bugs), for example, an Agile team delivers work in smaller, more manageable chunks. This enables teams to collaborate closely with their customers, develop a product plan and strategy in real time, and make adjustments as needed.

Whether the endpoint for your organization looks like co-location, fully remote, hybrid, or some futuristic model our feeble twenty-first century brains can barely comprehend, embracing an Agile mindset will start you on the track to success.



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01

Why Agile?

[The four values and 12 principles at the heart of Agile](#) were created by and for software engineers. Over the past 20 years, though, Agile has successfully spread to just about every industry and function, thanks in large part to the Scrum Guide. Developed in the 1990s, Scrum is an Agile methodology that focuses on completing goals within set periods of time, called sprints. The 2010 Scrum Guide brought Scrum to the masses, allowing teams and organizations to operationalize Agile concepts.

If you're new to Scrum (or want a refresher), [this resource will help get you started](#). Scrum is a lightweight framework that accelerates productivity and innovation, improves communication, removes the things that slow work down (known as impediments), and forces clear prioritization.

Most importantly, Scrum is a flexible (dare we say ... agile?) system that can adapt to the way your team works best. [It empowers teams to decide exactly how they do the work](#) to achieve their sprint and product goals (more on these later). This alone can greatly improve an organization's culture from the ground up. With Scrum, teams can conquer the biggest challenges raised by the new era of work: collaboration, intentionality, and sustainability.

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02

Intentional collaboration

Assembling a team is just the first step — it takes an intentional collaboration strategy to really bring members together.

Let's take a look at the four biggest issues impacting collaboration and how Scrum can help your team overcome them.

Issue 1: Teamwork

From the '96 Bulls to the Avengers to Taylor Swift and Jack Antonoff, what do the most successful teams have in common? The ability to [collaborate effectively](#) and accomplish things together that could never be achieved by working alone. In the not-so-distant past, co-location was seen as the best way to create an environment where effective collaboration flourished. And while the '96 Bulls may not have been super effective as a distributed team, for the rest of us, it turns out location isn't nearly as important a factor as we once believed.

These days, it seems that shared *workspace* — more than *workplace* — is the defining characteristic that supports effective collaboration, especially when it comes to distributed or hybrid teams. That is to say, technology has made it entirely possible to work together without being together. However, emphasizing the workspace over the workplace does come with its share of challenges.

PROBLEM:

Creating a central location where teams can work

SOLUTION:

Embrace a digital-first infrastructure

Highly-productive distributed and hybrid teams rely on an infrastructure that's accessible from any location. Developing these systems is relatively easy when you embrace a digital-first mentality. Digital common spaces and platforms like Slack, Mural, Jira, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom have revolutionized work by allowing real-time and asynchronous collaboration to efficiently take place.

[Brainstorming sessions](#) and Scrum events that once took place on physical whiteboards are now being held in virtual workspaces (*PLUG ALERT* — you'll even find some new and helpful Mural templates for these sessions below). When you commit to digital-first, you're committing to a philosophy that shifts from thinking of the workplace as a physical space to thinking of the workplace as digitally-defined.



PROBLEM:

Developing workflows and expectations that work for everyone

SOLUTION:

Create or update your team working agreement canvas

Ever consider the difference between a team and a workgroup? Workgroups are focused on individual contributions. Teams are focused on shared goals, collaboration, and cohesion. Getting groups of individuals to think of themselves as a team can be a contentious and time-consuming process; we humans can be a petty, complicated species, as Taylor Swift and Jack Antonoff would attest.

But fret not, Mural is here to help. Launch (or relaunch) your team using our Team Working Agreement Canvas template. Why? Well, because team working agreements accelerate cohesion and collectively set the behavioral norms, expectations,

commitments, and shared purpose that lead to high performance.

Whether your team is newly formed or has been working together for a while, make time to co-design agreements using the steps in this template:

- Come up with a team name, motto, and mission
- Assign roles and responsibilities
- Choose metrics and KPIs
- Discuss strengths, skills, gaps, and growth opportunities for your team
- Co-create values and norms as a team
- Look ahead to events and key dates

Establishing these team working agreements will help you lead your team regardless of where they're working from. Going through this exercise is a great way to make sure the deliberate changes you make to your workplace/workspace culture are baked into how your team works together.

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PROBLEM:

Knowing what to focus on as a team

SOLUTION:

Prioritize swarming

Effective collaboration rarely just happens, regardless of whether the team is [hybrid](#), co-located, or distributed. It has to be prioritized to make it a team norm. As it's known to many practitioners of Scrum, swarming is a simple but often overlooked way to immediately boost the performance of any team. And it is so simple to implement that even teams new to Scrum can begin using it right away. Swarming occurs when as many team members as possible work simultaneously on the same prioritized piece of work exclusively until they've finished.

The exact nature of what this entails is dependent on the work being done. But the goal remains the same. Once that prioritized piece of work is completed, the team then swarms on the next item until it too is completed.

And so on. Give it a try.

Issue 2: Connection

Connection — which is the key to high-impact collaboration — can be challenging for any team. Throw in a distributed workforce spread across time zones and cultures, and you could be facing some serious obstacles to success. If some team members are working together in the office while others are connecting digitally, the team could end up with a “here and there” dichotomy. [Connection will suffer.](#)

Compounding this is what's known as proximity bias — the misguided perception that those working near you (or leadership) are more reliable and better at what they do. Left unchecked, this bias can leave distributed or hybrid team members feeling disconnected, unmotivated, or worse.

Fortunately, digital workspaces built for collaboration (like, ahem, Mural) and frameworks (like Scrum) have never been more available and easy to adopt. Let's look at how digital solutions can help your team evolve and connect better than ever before.



PROBLEM:
How to work in tandem
from anywhere

SOLUTION:
Put the Scrum framework to work

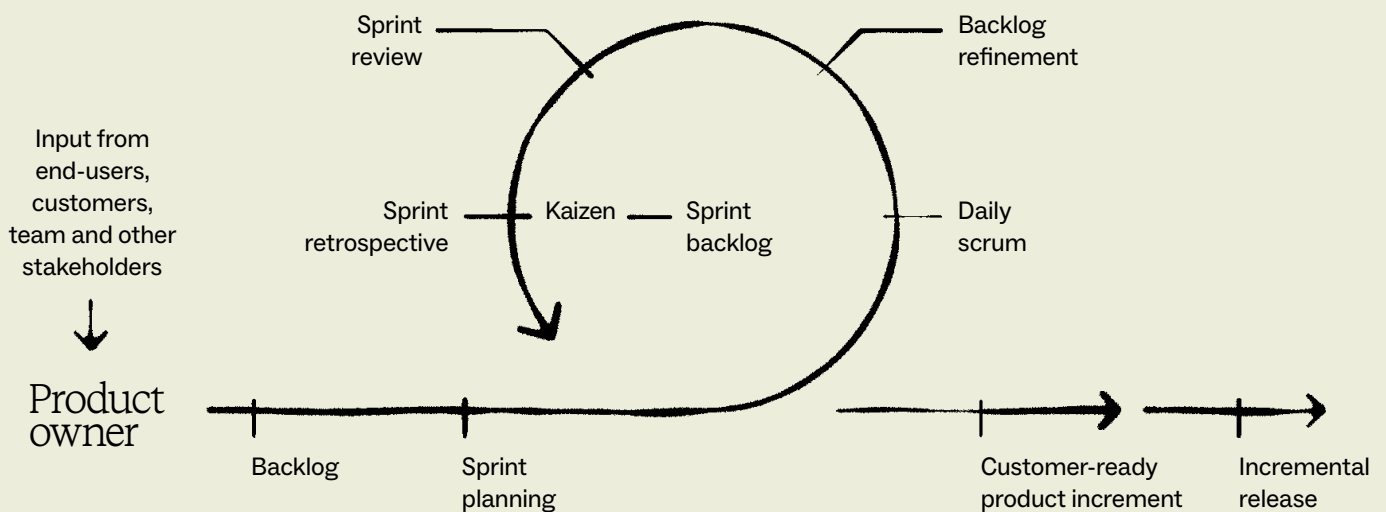
A feature of the Scrum framework is the lightweight structure it provides teams. The framework creates regularity, a rhythm, or cadence that gives just enough structure to boost connection, productivity, and innovation without bogging individuals down in never-ending meetings. With this

structure, it's very clear what the purpose of each meeting is and where a Scrum team is in the process — both extremely helpful for distributed teams.

Let's walk through the five Scrum events and the impact they have, and how they are even more powerful in a distributed situation. You'll also find Mural templates for many of these events to help accelerate your team.

Sprint

1-4 Weeks



Sprint Planning The first event in the Scrum framework is setting a clear goal to give shape and structure to the coming week or two. The team commits to a body of work they think they can complete and identifies specific and actionable things they need to accomplish to successfully finish the sprint and meet the [sprint goal](#). Sprint planning helps distributed teams ensure that they are in agreement and alignment on the “why and what” of the work to be done.

You can find a [Mural sprint planning template here](#).

A clear sprint backlog coming out of sprint planning gives every member of the team a shared understanding of what needs to be accomplished. This focus is critically important; otherwise, it's far too easy for a team to splinter. A clear sprint goal and sprint backlog gives them that focus.

Daily Scrum Limited to just fifteen minutes each day, this is a critical touchpoint for team members working in remote locales. The Daily Scrum is where Scrum teams give clarity on where the work stands and identify any surface impediments. It's also a daily chance to replan based on the latest feedback, information, impediments, or emergent changes.

Replanning at the Daily Scrum is always important. It gives the Scrum team the ability to quickly pivot as needed. And that's invaluable in situations where unpredictability can be the norm.

There's another benefit of the Daily Scrum, one that's often overlooked: It gives people a reliable touchpoint of connection. Even if that's the only meeting teams have all day, just fifteen minutes

can be the difference between your team feeling like a bunch of lone wolves and feeling like members of a pack.

You can find a [Mural Daily Scrum template here](#).

Sprint Review This is where stakeholders and customers give feedback on what the Scrum team has accomplished each sprint. These feedback loops can easily exist with distributed teams. And feedback is always key. For a team working virtually, this touchpoint reminds them that there is a world outside of their team. That they are delivering value and pleasing customers. That their work has meaning.

You can find a [Mural sprint review template here](#).

Sprint Retrospective Here's our chance to get better by identifying what worked, what didn't, and what we can do better. No matter what, the process always needs to be examined, iterated on, and improved. When things work well, they should be celebrated and replicated wherever possible. The sprint retrospective provides teams with a predictable and safe space to be heard about how happy and engaged they are in relation to their role, the team, and the company.

The ultimate purpose of the sprint retrospective is for the team to have a chance to identify and implement process improvements that'll help them improve how they're working to get more done — and be happier doing it.

You can find a [Mural retrospective template here](#).



Keep it digital

Once your team begins sharing information exclusively in digital forms, you'll see how they're more connected. Scrum teams, for example, can shift their entire [PI planning \(program increment planning\)](#) sessions to digital. Encourage them to use a [digital thinking canvas like Mural](#) to record and share important information, [plan and track work](#), and facilitate sprint events.

Keep it equal

As touched on earlier, connection challenges can leave some team members feeling out of the loop. This is about more than a bad Wi-Fi connection or microphone. Instead of placing the burden on individuals to figure out how to insert themselves into a conversation, make it a team norm that [everyone is responsible for making sure all feel equally welcome and able to contribute](#).

One way to make sure everyone is on an equal footing is to give everyone a seat at the table (in digital terms). If one person needs to call in, have everyone call in, even if some team members are in the office and could meet in person. This helps to avoid proximity bias — the “here or there” dichotomy we mentioned earlier — and keep things equal.

For more on how to run hybrid meetings that get people motivated, check out our [complete guide to hybrid meetings here](#).

Issue 3: Intentionality

Perspective is not just a neat trick for making art look three-dimensional; it's a critical ability for teams to develop. Unless team members are regularly taking stock of where they are in relation to the organization's purpose, vision, and values, they can find themselves going through the motions and easily fall into ruts. This can lead to a situation where there's less of a team environment than a group of individuals working adjacent to one another. To avoid this challenge, teams need to get intentional.

PROBLEM:

Feeling penned in by outmoded work habits

SOLUTION:

Build your culture with the new model in mind

A cultural reboot takes more than simply taking a traditional team environment and recreating it in a digital space. Instead, you must intentionally build systems and processes around the new reality of work. In an intentionally-designed workplace culture, processes and tools empower teams to get work done.

So what does this mean in practice?

For distributed teams, this means that the processes and tools allow teams to connect in a sustainable way. Sustainable as in “able to be sustained,” not as in “safe for the environment.” (Although do please try to keep your teams safe for the environment as well.) You should give team members the ability to be as productive at home or from the road as they were in a traditional workplace like the office. When leaders provide their teams with the right processes and resources, employees feel confident they can accomplish everything,



regardless of how challenging or complex.

An intentional workplace culture has processes that:

- Enable individuals and interactions: Focus, alignment, and collaboration don't just happen on their own. They require information, communication, and understanding of what work needs to be done and why.
- Create a '[Minimum Viable Bureaucracy](#)': Provide just enough guardrails to carry out the function(s) required without impeding creativity and the delivery of value to customers.
- Work as well remotely as in the office: As obvious as this point is, it's still a problem for many distributed teams.

An intentional workplace culture has resources that:

- Make the team's work visible to each other: There are many digital backlog tools to help highlight what work needs to be done and how far teams have

progressed. Find one that fits your workflow, not one that requires you to fit it.

- Foster effective communication: Both synchronous and asynchronous communication have a place and should be thoughtfully supported with technology (software) and other resources (like an office!).
- Enable effective collaboration and swarming: This is a well-established pattern for success for any team, including distributed and hybrid ones. For a distributed work environment, the right processes and tools are especially complicated. A reservation system for team spaces and webcams on office whiteboards won't cut it. You need infrastructure that is as accessible and effective virtually as it is in the office.

PROBLEM:

Do we really need a central office or what?

SOLUTION:

Remember the office's purpose

To intentionally build your workplace culture with the new model of work in mind, you need to take a step back and think about what-the-heck the purpose of an office is in the first place.

Ask two fundamental questions:

- What does having employees report daily to a particular building accomplish?
- Does the return to office (RTO) provide a return on investment (ROI) for both the business and the employees?

These days, when so much time is spent communicating, building, and connecting through digital platforms, the office looks more like one of many resources for teams to leverage when needed. Because physical spaces are a high-cost tool for

“Work is not a place.
It's what you accomplish together.”

Jim Kalbach, Chief Evangelist, Mural



businesses, ask if the value of maintaining an office outweighs the overhead for your team.

If your answer is "yes, the juice is worth the squeeze," then it makes sense to co-locate. If "no" — or if you don't know — consider if there might be other ways (and moments) to bring people together in a common physical space for collaboration. Ways that don't require maintaining a permanent physical workplace. Like regular off-sites, or, ya' know, brunch.

Issue 4: Sustainability

The fourth challenge faced by distributed teams is sustainability — that is, creating habits and practices that won't result in burnout. When working from home is an option (or the normative behavior of the team), there's a very real danger that employees will set unsustainable schedules for themselves. In some ways, it's a good problem to have. Many of us default to doing too much. But when workers are doing too much, too often, it can create resentment and unhappiness that doesn't do anyone any good.

It's always difficult to shut off after a long day of work, and when your office is your dining room table, sliding into working 12- and 14-hour days can happen almost without notice. This is especially true if you have team members who work in different time zones. With workspaces like Slack or [Microsoft Teams](#) serving the function of

a digital headquarters, it's all too easy to not know when most folks have called it a day. In organizations with employees spread across time zones, a common quitting time norm may be impossible to achieve. That's why [workplace flexibility](#) is so important.

It's time to look at your workplace culture:

- Are you speaking out of both sides of your mouth when it comes to taking self-care breaks?
- Is your organization sending mixed messages about what sustainability means?
- Is sustainability a value that you communicate regularly?

What was once a simmering problem waiting to boil over became a full-blown crisis in the post-pandemic age. Your team needs you to support them as they learn how to prioritize happiness and maintain a sustainable pace of work. We've come up with three solutions to achieve this goal.

SOLUTION:

Maximize time spent together and apart

Teams need to make the most of both their synchronous and [asynchronous](#) time to succeed. Not only do you want to stick to [carefully thought-through agendas](#) whenever possible; it's also important to [track all your work visually](#) for everyone so people know who needs to do what, when.

In Scrum, this is done with a sprint backlog or product backlog. If you already have a backlog, make sure you're embracing a digital-first mentality and that there's an



easily accessible virtual version available. Using a digital workspace like Mural that can be accessed from anywhere, Scrum teams automatically have an inventory (backlog) of work to be done that they can return to whenever they need to know the next steps.

SOLUTION:
Use the right metrics

Metrics can be a scary word, but if you learn to love your metrics, you can reduce confusion and highlight a team's progress (and setbacks) through the product development process. You can use Agile metrics to streamline your delivery process and keep workflows moving at a sustainable pace.

Here are a few metrics Scrum can help teams optimize for sustainability:

- **Sprint burndown:** Teams organize work to be completed into time-boxed sprints. Teams that consistently meet their forecasts may look really great, but don't let this tempt you into fudging the numbers and marking a task complete before it's ready.
- **Velocity:** Velocity is the average amount of work teams complete during a sprint, usually measured in story points. It's very useful for forecasting and it's important to monitor velocity evolution to ensure sustainability.
- **Control charts:** Control charts focus on the cycle of time for work in progress, tracking total time from "in progress"

to "done." Measuring this is an efficient way to improve a team's processes, because the changes are evident and adjustments can be made almost immediately.

SOLUTION:
Track feelings of burnout in retrospectives and act on the feedback

Scrum retrospectives are a great opportunity to not only reflect on the past Sprint, but also on how the team is feeling. If you're already doing regular Retros, start tracking feelings of burnout and react to the feedback if the team or team members are feeling overworked.

Identify and tackle negative trends in happiness before they become a problem. Empower your teams to make sure they are keeping a sustainable pace. Ask for ways to improve work-life balance and listen to the answers. There are countless ways an organization can prioritize the well-being of its employees.



03

What's next?
Inspect, adapt,
improve.

One of the greatest advantages of using Scrum is that the system is iterative. This means teams are always encouraged to inspect, adapt, and improve. No system or process is ever a “one-and-done” proposition. There’s always more to learn!

Learn how [Mural and the LUMA System™](#) can help you assess where you are, craft impactful strategies for improvement, and track your progress toward your goals. Get in touch with [Mural's Professional Services](#) team today to get started.

