

# Traditional Battle Rhythms Are Dead

**Why the military needs to use the scrum framework**

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For anyone who has served on a higher-level staff, it is clear there are numerous inefficiencies. Despite endless meetings, working groups, synchs, and other time-consuming requirements, the traditional battle rhythm has failed to deliver in our high tempo operational organizations. The Scrum Framework has proven itself as a useful answer to what today's battle rhythm is lacking. Scrum is a team-oriented, disciplined process that enables deliberate and continuous improvements while having the flexibility to pivot in a chaotic operating environment.<sup>1</sup> The term scrum is taken from rugby and represents a tight-knit team working together to advance the ball down the field. The use of the scrum framework is now taking root in units throughout the Navy and Marine Corps as a result of the efforts of Mr. J.J. Sutherland and U.S. Navy Commander Jon Haase.<sup>2</sup> These efforts have ignited a spark at the Centers for Adaptive Warfighting that has resulted in the creation of the Military Scrum Master Course and the training of over 2,000 Sailors and Marines.<sup>3</sup>

The resounding positive result from units that have taken the risk to implement Scrum is that they will never return to the traditional battle rhythm. Recently, Marines and Sailors have implemented the Scrum Framework into battle rhythms at the section, platoon, company, battalion, and regimental levels. These early adopters include Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 2; 1/1Mar; 2d Intelligence Battalion; 2d Maintenance Battalion; several schools within Marine Corps Combat

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Service Support Schools; and many others. Those early adopter stories provided compelling feedback and case studies to illustrate a fundamental truth: Scrum is a new way of approaching complexity by using a straightforward and disciplined process. Time and time again, units that have implemented Scrum experience 30 percent to 120 percent increases in productivity.<sup>4</sup> The following four lessons will highlight the impacts of using the Scrum Framework and advocate for the implementation of Scrum throughout the military.

## **Lesson 1: Transparency and communication throughout the team and the entire organization.**

Before adopting Scrum, the operations section of 2d Intelligence Battalion was similar to many other units—fast-paced and chaotic. As a force-provider for II MEF, the battalion deploys intelligence detachments all over the world and on a constant rotational basis. Every Marine in the operations section worked hard, constantly multi-tasking, and putting in long hours. The team always seemed to be operating at 100

percent capacity. The problem was that, despite their hard work, they only focused on the “closest alligator to the boat,” and they never could seem to get ahead. Because the Marines were so busy, communication within the section and across the battalion often fell by the wayside—always busy, but not consistently productive. Enter the Scrum Framework. Each day now begins with the morning standup to discuss the work completed yesterday, what will be done today, and impediments preventing mission accomplishment. Instead of various teams operating in “silos of excellence,” now there is shared awareness throughout the section.

One of the tenants of Scrum is seeking out brutally honest feedback directly from the Sailors or Marines that your unit is supporting. The feedback loop directly from these “customers” helps to shed light on what is essential to the supported units. The expanding team transparency established new levels of trust for internal and external customers benefiting the entire battalion. The iterative or repetitive process of identifying customers, soliciting feedback, and implementing changes is one of the keys of the Scrum Framework. The use of a physical Scrum Board serves as an “information radiator” to the team that helps to increase transparency and allows the team to sync activities just by looking at the board. The implementation of Scrum has established a culture that promotes open dialogue and the free sharing of information to increase the mutual understanding throughout the team.

**Lesson 2: The Scrum Framework uses a disciplined, agile approach that keeps the team and staff focused.**

1/1 Marines found that the problem with the plan of action and milestones task tracker was ineffective because it was hidden away as a spreadsheet on SharePoint and only updated hours before the weekly meeting. Once the operations section implemented the Scrum Framework, Marines could quickly orient on the essential task for the day and see which tasks required additional support. Using the visible Scrum Board for all to see, enabled

Marines to autonomously select the job they want to take on to accomplish their team mission. The most critical step required to implement Scrum is compiling every task and writing each task on one sticky note. These sticky notes are organized by priority and placed on the Scrum Board under the product backlog section. Once complete, the team can start the five essential elements of the Scrum Framework: The Sprint, Sprint Planning, the Daily “Scrum” Standup, Sprint Review, and Retrospective.<sup>5</sup> Sprints are a fixed length of time that is between one to four weeks. Most Navy and Marine Corps units have found that one-week Sprints are ideal.

The next step is for the team to begin Sprint Planning by using the items at the top of the Product Backlog to forecast how much the team can accomplish during this Sprint. Sprint Planning is one of the hallmarks of Scrum and is an opportunity for the entire team to understand what the priority is for the current Sprint, and what else the team can complete during the Sprint. During this meeting, everyone agrees on what the overall “sprint goal” will be for that week. The sprint goal is usually determined or aligned with that main priority or vision for that specific week. A visual board posted in the workspace becomes the “information radiator” for all to see. Electronic plan of action and milestones have the assumption that a project will come together as designed. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. The result is a reduction in the scope of a project or working to extremes, days before a deadline. The use of the Scrum Framework has enabled a disciplined approach that keeps the team focused while maintaining the flexibility to pivot for emerging demands.

**Lesson 3: Scrum focuses the team on delivering value to the customers of the organization.**

The next essential element of Scrum is called the Sprint Review. The purpose of this event is to review what the team has accomplished during the Sprint. Most important, it is an opportunity to receive unfiltered direct feedback from the customers of the organization. For example, as an S-3 Operations Section,

the customers are the companies, other staff sections, the Marines within the battalion, the sergeant major, the battalion commander, and higher headquarters. The Sprint Review is the responsibility of the product owner. The focus is on ensuring the team is working on the most critical work and is adding value to the organization. By identifying who their customers are, the operations section has been able to solicit feedback from those customers. The feedback is recorded and moved into the product backlog to enable action during the next Sprint. This rapid feedback and implementation loop is a foundational hallmark of Scrum.

**Lesson 4: Focus on improving the productivity of the team every single Sprint.**

The final step in the Scrum framework is called the Retrospective, which is an opportunity for the team to think about what went right and what to improve for the next Sprint. The Scrum Master leads the Retrospective by focusing on increasing the productivity of the team during each Sprint. In pursuit of this goal, the Scrum Master works to remove impediments or obstacles that are preventing the team from increasing tempo and productivity. One important distinction to make is that higher productivity does not equal a lesser quality of work. It is often talked about while teaching the Military Scrum Master Course at the Centers for Adaptive Warfighting. Often senior military leaders do not believe that a team can increase productivity as much as 300 to 1,200 times without losing quality.<sup>6</sup> However, success in both military and civilian organizations have demonstrated that exponential increases in productivity are routine results of Scrum teams.

**Conclusion**

With so much documentation of success, and so many Fortune 500 companies using the Scrum at scale, you would assume that Scrum implementation requires significant outside support.<sup>7</sup> It is not so. Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit Two started with a copy of the publicly-downloadable, nineteen-

page Scrum guide, and J.J. Sutherland's book, *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*. A year later, they were 1,200 percent more productive than they had been when they started.<sup>8</sup> By now, that story has been replicated within enough units, that it is not a fluke. Resources now abound for jump-starting the process. The Centers for Adaptive Warfighting teach regular classes, in-person and online.<sup>9</sup> If you visit the website, you can find personnel near you, or in your MOS.<sup>10</sup> They have led their implementation of Scrum—plus other tools that magnify its success. You may even find that someone in your command is already using Scrum. It is time to take a risk, try something new, and implement Scrum throughout the military.

### Notes

1. Jeff Sutherland, *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*, (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2014).
2. J.J. Sutherland, *The Scrum Fieldbook: A Master Class on Accelerating Performance, Getting Results, and Defining the Future*, (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2019).
3. Brandon Smart, "Maneuverists for Agility: The Marine Corps Needs to Adapt and Innovate," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2020).
4. *The Scrum Fieldbook*.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Sign-up for the Military Scrum Master Course on the Centers for Adaptive Warfighting website: <https://mceits.usmc.mil>.

10. Ibid.



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