

...PROBLEMS IN AGILE TEAMS

GENERAL PROJECT SET-UP

NO PRODUCT OWNER

The team has no PO. This includes Product Owners who are so frequently absent, that they might as well not exist.

Who is going to prioritise the work and guide the team in terms of focus for the product?



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PROXY PRODUCT OWNER

If your Product Owner can't be around for the team, maybe they have got someone to stand in for them.

Unfortunately, it's unlikely that this 'proxy' Product Owner will have either the knowledge or authority needed for a good PO.



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MULTIPLE PRODUCT OWNERS

Rather than have a single person, the team has multiple subject matter experts trying to direct their focus.

This may often mean that priorities are determined by the HiPPO (highest paid person's opinion) or the person who shouts the loudest in planning. You may see the user story hokey-pokey during Sprints: "You put the feature in [to the Sprint Backlog]. You take the story out [of the Sprint Backlog]. In, out. In, out. Shake it all about."



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PRODUCT OWNER = SCRUM MASTER

Did someone decide that two people doing two different roles was inefficient? Or maybe the Product Owner left and you can't fill the PO role, so the Scrum Master "stepped in temporarily".

One of the Scrum Master's roles is to challenge the team regarding their approach and question over-baring POs; that's going to be tricky if they're the same person!



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PO DOESN'T OWN PRODUCT BACKLOG

Is the Product Owner too busy to manage and prioritise the Product Backlog or maybe they just can't be bothered?

Whatever the excuse is, they've managed to palm it off on someone else, despite that person probably having neither the authority nor knowledge that a good PO needs.

[Double tick if person now responsible for the backlog is the Scrum Master]



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THE SCRUM-DAMENTALIST

"If it's not Scrum, then it's wrong". The Scrum-damentalist is dogmatic in their approach and doesn't believe that the Scrum framework should be adapted to an individual team's circumstances.

Chances are they've worked with only one implementation of Scrum in the past, and they think that every other organisation should work in that way.



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NO SCRUM MASTER

Did someone deem the Scrum Master role as unnecessary?

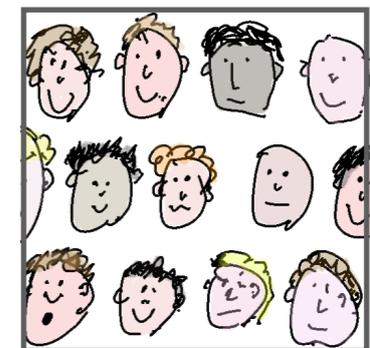
Most teams benefit from having a servant-leader to skilfully facilitate meetings, help remove impediments when the team is stuck, support the team and Product Owner with the Product and Sprint Backlogs. Even the most experienced teams can still benefit from someone coaching them to a better future.



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OVER-SIZED TEAM

The general agreement is that up to 9 people in an agile team works best. Much more than this and you'll find that it gets much harder to self-organise and be effective (stand-ups start dragging on, planning takes much longer, retrospectives become tedious, face-to-face communication gets difficult, etc).

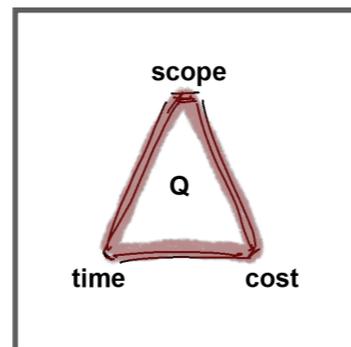


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IRON TRIANGLE NIGHTMARE

Are scope, cost and time all fixed? If there is no flexibility in any of these factors, then you are likely to be heading for a disaster. At least one of these should be open for discussion.



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IMPOSED DEFINITION OF "DONE"

The team has an explicit Definition of "Done", but it wasn't produced by them.
Extra tick if nobody can explain why.



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NO DEFINITION OF "DONE"

If the Definition of "Done" has not been agreed by the team, and has not been made explicit, how can the team all play by the same rules?



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DONE DONE DONE DONE

"Done" is used by most teams to describe a completed state. But, for some reason, your team needs a state after 'completed' and has called it 'Done Done'.

An extra tick for each additional use of "Done".



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START OF THE SPRINT

PO NOT IN PLANNING SESSION

The problem with someone who has product knowledge and the authority to decide on the prioritisation of work, is that they are often very busy people. As a result, it might be that the team's PO can't always make planning sessions.

Unfortunately, the role of the PO is to help guide the team in terms of product direction and be available to clarify anything about a requirement that is unclear, so they really need to be in these sessions.



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NOT VALIDATING USER NEEDS

You might have user stories, but they're not the needs of your users.

If your product is going to be valuable to customers, it has to give them what they need; not what you (or someone else in your organisation) think they need.



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STAKEHOLDERS NOT REPRESENTED

A major role of the Product Owner is to listen to interested parties, and filter that into the team in a clear and timely manner that maximises value for customers and the business. That's not happening here.

If they aren't listening to these voices, chances are that they'll be building something other than what is really needed.



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DETAILED SPECS

The Product Owner brings a detailed specification that they want the team to implement or tells them how to build it?

The role of Product Owner is to explain the needs and goals that the team is trying to fulfil; not how to build the thing itself.



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HORIZONTAL SLICING

Does the team structure work so that products are built in layers? For example, the database layer produced in one Sprint, followed by the logic in the following Sprint, then the GUI in the next Sprint. Building products in this way ensures that no financial benefit or feedback is received before the final, big bang release.

The alternative is to build small 'vertical' slices of the whole product in stages. For example, building a skeleton product that has minimal functionality (but still does something useful) in the first Sprint, then adding to that functionality in the second Sprint, then a little bit more in the next Sprint. Get feedback as soon as possible (and start earning income) by getting customers to use your product early on.



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SILENCE DURING PLANNING SESSION

Planning sessions are there for the team to establish exactly what it is that the organisation is asking them to create. So it should be a lively discussion.

If the team is just accepting work without clarifying the details, they are missing an opportunity to clarify requirements and avoid misunderstandings before work has begun.



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PO PROVIDES ESTIMATES

The Product Owner estimates how long the team will take to complete their work.

The best people to estimate how long they need to work on an item (if that's even possible) is the team who will be doing the work.



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THE LOUD MINORITY

Estimates are provided, but only by one or two vocal members of the team who hijack and dominate the session.

Agile teams have a number of methods for getting team-wide estimates, rather than having the noisy minority decide on their behalf.



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ESTIMATES AREN'T A TEAM SPORT

Only some of the team are invited to the planning / estimating sessions.



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TIME-BASED ESTIMATES

Did someone ask for "accurate estimates"? Or maybe someone is running a capacity planning spreadsheet so they can maximise output from the team? Whatever the reason, estimates are guesses in hours (extra tick if using minutes!).

Countless studies have shown that estimating in time-based units doesn't result in more accurate estimates. Such a fine-grained estimate will just add pressure onto the team (and usually onto the individual team members, as estimates in minutes are usually put against specific people in the team).



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EVERYTHING IS A "5"

The team sizes work items using story points but they size everything the same size because they are frustrated and bored by the process.



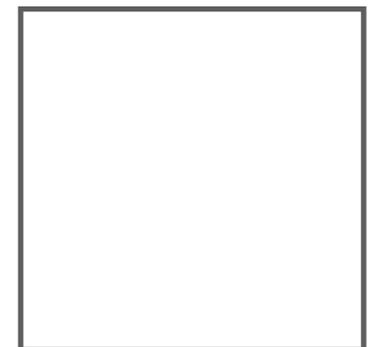
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NO SPRINT GOAL

The team doesn't use Sprint Goals.

These are designed to provide teams with an overall guide for the Sprint, helping them choose how to implement the requirements.



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STORY POINTS BEING USED TO JUDGE

Is the team's velocity linked to their bonuses? Or maybe the number of story points delivered per Sprint is detailed in the client contract (and maybe even linked to payment)?

Most of the sizing methods used by Agile teams are for the benefit of the team, to help them estimate the amount of work they hope to complete in the Sprint. Once you start to commercialise estimates, you encourage them to be 'gamed'.



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STANDARDISED STORY POINTS

A team uses relative sizing to estimate new work items compared to other work items that they have previously estimated. These estimates are not relative to another team's estimates.

Why would you spend effort trying to get multiple teams' estimates to be in sync?



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ESTIMATES BECOME CONTRACTS

The team has provided an estimate of what they hope to complete in a Sprint, or when they estimate they will finish a certain requirement ... and someone has taken this to be a guarantee.

If the team then 'fails' to complete the work in the allocated timescale, they will be criticised or even punished.



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DURING THE SPRINT

VARIABLE SPRINT LENGTHS

Does the length of the team's Sprints vary?
Two weeks ... then one week ... then three weeks ... then back to two weeks.

The length of Sprints should remain constant.



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NO VISUALISATION OF WORK

The team has neither a physical board nor an electronic version.



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LONG SPRINTS

Your Sprints are longer than one month.

Long Sprints (i.e. longer than 1 month) prevent short feedback loops and don't enable regular delivery of value to customers.



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BLOCKED STORIES IN SPRINT

The majority of work items in the Sprint Backlog blocked.



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NOT IDENTIFIED AS BLOCKED

Items within the Sprint are blocked, but this is not identified on the board.

Ideally, a blocked item will be identified as such on your board, with a reason and date that resolution is expected. We want to get it moving as soon as possible.



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STORIES GOING BACKWARDS

A story goes backwards on the board (i.e. away from the 'Done' column).



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STORIES NOT MOVING FORWARDS

Most stories stay in the same place on the board from day-to-day. Maybe work has progressed, but there is no way of knowing. Maybe they really aren't moving anywhere.

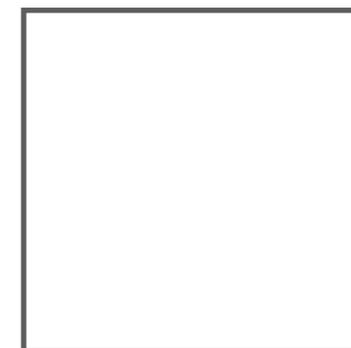


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MULTIPLE ITEMS IN EXPEDITE LANE

Some teams (especially ones using the Kanban Method) have an expedite (aka urgent, priority) swimlane on their board. It is recommended that such swimlanes have a limit of 1 item, but your team has more than one in there. Somehow they are BOTH the number one priority.



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BLOWN WIP LIMITS

Your team has decided to use WIP limits on their board, but also blatantly exceeds them.

WIP limits are essential for any team using a pull system ... but ignoring them means that it isn't a pull system because there is nothing constraining the system.



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UNSTRUCTURED STAND-UP

The stand-up is disorganised and nobody knows who should speak first or what they should say.

Nobody has heard of the 'what I did yesterday, what I will do today, whether I have blockers' format, or thought about walking the stories on the board (starting with the story closest to 'Done').



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SCRUM MASTER 'CALLS' STAND-UP

Whether it is by ringing a bell, clapping their hands, or calling team members' names, the Scrum Master calls the stand-up to order.

Sounds like the Scrum Master is more servant than servant-leader. Has anyone mentioned the concept of self-organising teams? Probably not.



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MEANINGLESS STAND-UP INPUT

Team members give updates on stories that are 'In Progress' and assigned to them, but their updates are barely more than a grunt to show they're alive: "Yep, still working on that", for example.

Q: "How do you hope to take this story closer to 'Done' before the next stand-up?"

A: "Ug"

Q: "Are you blocked in any way?"

A: "Ug"



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PO DOMINATING STAND-UP

The daily stand-up is there for the team to keep themselves aligned, not to report back to the Product Owner. But nobody has told the team's Product Owner this, so the whole event is a Q&A led by the PO.



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STAND-UP DIRECTED TOWARDS PO

Whether the Product Owner encourages it or not, the team members direct their daily updates towards the PO like children looking for approval from their parent.

The stand-up is an opportunity for the team to self-organise and keep aligned, not for getting daily approval from the PO.



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SCRUM MASTER 'DIRECTS' STAND-UP

Like a conductor in an orchestra, the Scrum Master calls on each individual in the team to deliver their update. It's stilted and the team is treated a bit like school children reporting to teacher.

What happens when the Scrum Master is not there?



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THE BOARD IS RARELY UPDATED

The team has a physical board which visualises their progress, but it only gets updated once-a-day (probably just before or during stand-up). Then it stays frozen in time until the next day.

A board that is kept up-to-date in realtime is a great communication tool. Shame your board isn't maximising it's full potential.

Extra tick if Scrum Master has to ask team members to update it during the stand-up.



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SIDE-CONVERSATIONS AT STAND-UP

The stand-up is a great opportunity to discuss ongoing work and is crucial for collaboration. But occasionally some of the team splinter off to discuss aspects of the work whilst others are talking. This results in multiple concurrent conversations.



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BURNDOWN TOO GOOD

Burndown charts are supposed to give the team visibility on the amount of work remaining in a Sprint. There is a guideline drawn from day 0 to the final day. Most team's roughly track this, varying above and below the guideline.



But your team rarely deviates from the guideline: they appear to be on-track ... right until the end (when they surprisingly haven't finished everything).

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STAND-UP TOO LONG

The purpose of the daily stand-up is to help the team work together to achieve the Sprint Goal and complete the work in the Sprint Backlog. As a general rule, it should last for no longer than 15 minutes.

But this team's stand-up goes on much longer and goes into too much depth.



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SPRINT BACKLOG CHANGES

The Sprint Planning meeting goes well: you have worked with the Product Owner and chosen the items that will be in the Sprint Backlog.

But, at some point during the Sprint, the PO wants to switch some items in the Sprint Backlog.



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TEAM IS NOT CROSS-FUNCTIONAL

Cross-functional means having all the relevant skills on the team to be able to complete work items ... without relying on people outside the team.

Unfortunately, this isn't the case for the team.



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PEOPLE TURN UP LATE FOR EVENTS

People seem to turn up to events whenever they choose. This means the rest of the team is left waiting. Highly inefficient.

Just because we don't work in organisations that stifle our creativity, some people think that no rules apply. They confuse flexibility with lawlessness. For a team to be efficient, some of the 'old rules' still apply: one of these is turning up on time for meetings and events.



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TEAMS WORKING IN ISOLATION

Teams in your organisation aren't talking to each other; they're working in their own little bubbles.

Ideally, teams within an organisation talk to each other, regardless of whether they have dependencies on one another. Sharing experiences and information is useful, as well as a sense of community.



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DISREGARD FOR QUALITY

Someone, possibly the Product Owner, is pushing for a work item to be completed (and released to customers) despite it not being up to the usual quality. For software, this might mean that there are known bugs.

You hear the PO saying things like "Let's just ship it ... we can always come back and fix it later". But you know that you will never come back to it once it's released!



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GOLD-PLATING

At the beginning of the Sprint, the team agreed the solution to a specific work item. This has now been achieved and the team should move onto the next work item. However, rather than doing that, someone is continuing to work on it.

Unfortunately, this will probably result in other work items in the Sprint not being completed. You've completed the item requested, move on.



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INSUFFICIENT TESTS

Someone (other than the person who created the solution) should test the thing you are producing fulfils requirements. You cannot test your own work. Unfortunately, this isn't happening (extra tick if nobody is testing it!)

Expect problems and complaints once the work reaches your customers. Remember that the team is responsible for quality.



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SCOPE CREEP

At the beginning of the Sprint, the team agreed what a work item's goal was and it was added to the Sprint Backlog on this basis.

However, at some point during the Sprint, the scope of the item increased to include extra features.



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FINGER POINTING

The team should work as a single unit: they succeed and fail together. They are self-organising and strive to improve their working practices as a group.

Unfortunately, you see instances where, when something goes wrong, members of the team are singled out for blame.



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WORKING EXCESSIVE HOURS

One of the principles of Agile is that a team should work at a constant pace that is sustainable.

Unfortunately, you see a team regularly having to cram in extra hours to complete work. There's nothing wrong with motivating a team with deadlines, but not if it's going to require them to pull all-nighters. Inconsistent pace makes forecasting very difficult.



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**AT THE END OF
THE SPRINT**

Nothing finished by end of Sprint

No work items are completed by the end of the Sprint.

A team should only take on work items that they believe can be completed within the Sprint.



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Story points for partially completed work

Despite not completing a work item in full, the team decides to take some of the story points because it is 'nearly done'.

Story points count towards velocity once the whole work item has been completed and it's in a potentially shippable state; no points are awarded for work items that are partially completed.



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Work items carried over to next Sprint

This team carries work onto successive Sprints.

A team should only take on work items that they believe can be completed within the Sprint.



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Not potentially shippable

Each Sprint should result in a 'potentially shippable increment' - meaning that, if the Product Owner wants to, the feature can be released to customers.

This team hasn't got to that state (maybe because the necessary work items weren't completed, there are breaking bugs, or the new features don't work with the existing system).



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No release for over 1 month

The last release was over a month ago.

In order to benefit from feedback, we need to release what we make to our customers.

Why isn't anything going out the door?



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Retro dominated by a few

This team's Retrospectives are dominated by a small minority.

Everyone should contribute in the Retrospective. A good facilitator can help even the shyest of team members to join in.



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Team disengaged in retrospective

The team is not engaged in the Retrospective: they are bored and aren't really focused on team evolution.

Retrospectives are relatively easy to run ... but to consistently run good retrospectives is not so easy.



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Same ol' problems

The team raises the same problems every Retrospective but no attempt is made to improve the situation.



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Name and shame

Teams should work as a unit. They succeed and fail as a team.

But you see a team that is just a group of individuals who are quite prepared to point the finger when something goes wrong.



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No Retrospective for last Sprint

Each Sprint should contain a Retrospective where the team reflects on how to become more effective.

The last Sprint didn't have a Retrospective.



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No action points from Retro

The team has Retrospectives but no action points are agreed.

A good Retrospective results in established action points that will be taken before the next Retrospective.



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Cancelled Retrospective

Each Sprint should contain a Retrospective where the team reflects on how to become more effective.

Although the team scheduled a Retro for the last Sprint, it got cancelled. Maybe "something came up". Maybe it's just postponed. Really? Or will it be rolled into the next Sprint's retro?



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No Sprint Review

Each Sprint should contain a Sprint Review where the team's output is shown to all interested parties.

The last Sprint didn't have a Review.



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Cancelled Sprint Review

Each Sprint should contain a Sprint Review where the team's output is shown to all interested parties.

Although the team scheduled a Review for the last Sprint, it got cancelled. Maybe "something came up". Maybe it's just postponed. Really? Or will it be rolled into the next Sprint's showcase?



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