Impediments

Problem? What Problem?

Dealing Effectively with Impediments using Agile Thinking with Problem-solving Practices

Ben Linders

Foreword by Johanna Rothman

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Also By Ben Linders

This book is dedicated to all the great agile teams around the world to help them become even better in solving problems!

Problems and impediments are common to those working in agile. It is important to quickly identify them and find ways to means to either resolve the impediment or work around it. Ben Linders, with all his experience, comes up with a great book on how to address these issues and gives practical solutions to problems and impediments. This book is a great reference with the tools and techniques to navigate impediments both at a team level and at an organizational level.

Srinath Ramakrishnan, Agile coach and consultant

I really enjoyed the book: I found it to be right-sized and practical in the tone of advice offered. There are many techniques described in the book that will be useful to people in any role in an agile team, regardless of experience level or the framework preferred in your current context. I loved the ideas of signals and the difference between impediments and blockers. For anyone dealing with impediments, finding a way forward can feel challenging. This book will refresh your mindset and systematically offer tactical approaches.

Paddy Corry, Scrum master at eShopWorld

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Foreword

As a consultant, I only work with people who have problems. (No one calls a consultant when things go well.)

And, many of my clients confuse their problems (what Ben calls impediments) with the *signals* of the actual problem. That initial frame—differentiate between impediment and signal—sets the tone for the rest of the book.

Ben masterfully detangles the various ways problems expose themselves to the teams. And, he includes several ideas about adapting existing practices to help *your* team. He recommends you think of practices as patterns, not recipes.

The middle part of this book addresses many of the agile frameworks and how to challenge framework thinking. Too many people in the agile community think frameworks are recipes. All you need to do is apply the framework or "cook" the organization according to the recipe and you'll succeed. Ben (and I) have not seen that approach succeed.

Instead, Ben recommends we look for those signals. Once we see those signals, we can reconsider how to recognize and resolve our impediments. Ben addresses several common antipatterns, such as a person removing the impediment *for* the team. He recommends joint problem-solving—the team, team leadership, and the managers—for impediment removal. I agree with him. I rarely see the team "hero" succeed alone.

Ben spends a significant portion of the book on impediments beyond the team level. These systemic impediments challenge any agile team to succeed, never mind several teams acting in concert. Ben leads us through ways to recognize these problems, how to explain the impacts of these impediments, and how we might start

to resolve these problems.

In the last section, Ben suggests several reasonable actions to improving our problem-solving abilities. I particularly liked the section, "Don't Try to Change Everything at Once." Too many of my clients make that mistake and get stuck in all the changes.

Use this book to add more capabilities to your problem-solving toolkit. Integrate Ben's tips and keys as you read and you'll start to recognize your signals and impediments—and resolve them.

Johanna Rothman, Consultant and Writer, author of *Modern Management Made Easy, books 1-3*

Preface

This is the first book specifically about dealing with impediments using agile thinking with problem-solving practices. In this book, I explain why dealing with impediments matters. The book also provides approaches for you to effectively handle impediments in teams and beyond the teams. I'm also sharing experience stories from my practice.

This book is for agile teams, Scrum masters, tech leads, agile coaches, consultants, developers and testers, project managers, line managers, and CxOs; basically, anyone who is looking for an effective way to handle impediments or support people in doing that.

You may wonder how I came up with the title of this book *Problem? What Problem?*. When you know how to effectively deal with problems, then problems aren't a problem anymore for you. And that is exactly what this book aims to do: Help people developing their problem-solving skills and learn how to apply practices to effectively handle impediments.

This book doesn't intend to teach you what agile is or show you how to become agile. In essence, it is about dealing with impediments when you are working in an agile way. This book also explores how you can handle impediments using an agile mindset and thinking. It's about agile applied to problem-solving. Hence the subtitle *Dealing Effectively with Impediments using Agile Thinking with Problem-solving Practices*.

This book includes information about the Impediment Coaching Cards and the Impediment Board Game. You can download these Agile Coaching Tools for a nominal fee in my webshop.

I based this book on my experience as a developer, tester, team

leader, project manager, quality manager, process manager, consultant, coach, trainer, and adviser in Agile, Lean, Quality, and Continuous Improvement. This book dives into problem solving and impediments, viewing them from different perspectives and provides ideas, suggestions, practices, and experiences that will help you to become more effective in dealing with impediments.

I want to thank the many reviewers of my book for investing time and coming up with ideas to improve it (in alphabetical order): Mike Caddell, Tom Cagley, Glaudia Califano, Sunish Chabba, Paddy Corry, Scott Duncan, Madhavi Ledalla, Erwin van Maren, Jonathan Orgel, Kamil Puk, Annemiek Quirijns, Srinath Ramakrishnan, Carina Silfverduk, and David Spinks. Thank you for proofreading earlier versions of the book and providing many suggestions. Your feedback has helped me to make this a better book!

A big thanks to Johanna Rothman for writing the foreword for this book. The first time that I have met her in person was in 2003 at the Software Management & Applications of Software Measurement conference. She was a co-host and I did a session on the business benefits of root cause analysis. Johanna has a knack of coming up with practical solutions for solving problems in her books, articles, and newsletters. Over the years she has inspired me with great ideas that I used for solving problems; now I'm sharing what I'm using in this book.

I love to hear your experiences in dealing with impediments. Feel free to email me at benlinders@gmail.com!

Finally, I would like to thank all the people who invest time to read my blog and comment on the articles. Your feedback helps me to increase my understanding of topics that I write about and makes it worthwhile for me to keep blogging!

Ben Linders
July 2020

Introduction

Over the years, development and delivery of software have become more continuous and flow-based. Faster throughput is crucial to deliver value and get feedback from customers.

Agile defines impediments as problems that slow down teams or keep teams from getting work done. They are an obstruction or obstacle, something that hinders people. Impediments have an impact on the flow of work, they inhibit delivery of value.

Impediments need to be dealt with. This can be hard. Having the right skills and applying them using suitable practices can make a significant difference.

This book is about dealing effectively with impediments using agile thinking with problem-solving practices. It explores how teams and organizations can deal with problems themselves. By doing that, they become better in self-organizing the way that they do their work. The book also provides solutions for dealing with impediments beyond the team level.

My Experience with Solving Problems

Throughout my career, I became more and more interested in problem-solving. From my early days as a developer through to my later roles as a team leader and then as a project manager, solving problems was a major part of my work. Over time I became good at solving problems by practicing it.

To develop my problem-solving skills, I've read a lot of books on how to deal with problems. Trying out things from these books, I learned to analyze problems, decide what to do and how to do it, and take action to get problems out of the way. In this book, I share my learnings and experiences.

Scrum and other agile frameworks use the word "impediment" for anything that keeps teams from getting work done. Those are basic problems that need to be solved. The big difference with agile however is that it expects people to solve their own problems. So, everybody needs problem-solving skills. But how to develop them?

I started looking for ways to blend the agile mindset and principles with existing problem-solving practices. My aim was to adapt what's there for using it within modern software development, and show how these practices fit into Scrum, XP, Kanban, or any other agile framework.

I'm an active blogger at www.benlinders.com. On my blog, I share my experiences on agile and lean topics, including how to handle impediments in teams using agile thinking and practices.

Meanwhile, my work had changed. Since 2009 I'm a one-person company doing many different things to help people, teams, and

companies become better in developing and delivering high-quality software products and services.

In 2015 I published a blog series on handling impediments. The articles provided an approach and many practical agile tips. Being hands-on, these articles became very popular. I used them as a starting point for this book.

I train and coach. I advise teams and organizations. I write books. I also speak and give workshops at conferences.

In my workshops, I teach people how to deal with impediments to truly become self-organized. I created cards with signals about possible impediments. I use them in exercises where people practice recognizing potential problems and learning how to handle them.

Finding out that there's a limit to how much traveling I can do, I decided to go on my own "agile scaling and digitalization" journey.

My books, games, exercises, workshops and remote training, and other agile coaching tools that I use myself in my workshops and advice work are available as digital downloads for a nominal fee in my webshop at benlinders.com/shop/.

I decided to take the cards from my workshops, turn them into a product, and release them as Impediment Coaching Cards. This is the first-ever agile coaching tool for dealing with impediments.

Although these cards and the way I use them to help people to develop their impediment handling skills can contribute a lot already, I wanted to take it one step further by turning it into a real serious game.

At the XP Days Benelux 2018 I played a board game where people in teams learned how to deal with impediments. I based the game

on the famous Game of Goose board game (in Dutch: Ganzenbord) where I turned it from a competitive game into a collaborative game. I got great feedback at the XP Days which I used to update the game.

This game is available to the world in digital format as The Impediment Board Game. You can download it for a nominal fee.

Having a set of short articles and two agile coaching tools on impediments I started thinking about what more I could do to help the world to become better in dealing with impediments. Noticing that my third book The Agile Self-assessment Game, released early 2019, has become very popular I decided to share my knowledge and experience in dealing with impediments also in a book.

And that's why I wrote *Problem? What Problem? - Dealing Effectively with Impediments using Agile Thinking and Practices.*

What's in This Book

This book provides ideas with solutions for dealing effectively with impediments.

In the chapter Problem Solving and Impediments I explore why being able to deal with impediments matters for agile teams.

Dealing with Impediments in Teams provides an approach for recognizing and analyzing impediments and deciding on the actions.

In the intermezzo Agile Frameworks and Methods I discuss what Scrum, SAFe, LeSS, Scrum@Scale, and other agile methods provide for dealing with impediments.

Handling Impediments Beyond the Team Level dives into systemic organizational issues or problems that hinder multiple teams or need management support to solve them.

The chapter Increasing your Effectiveness provides many practices and tips to become better in dealing with impediments.

In Agile Coaching Tools for Impediments I describe games, coaching cards, and exercises, to improve impediment handling capabilities and skills. Training and Support explores workshops for assessing and improving your agility.

The Bibliography provides an extensive list of books, articles, and links, that you can use to acquire in-depth knowledge for dealing with impediments.

This is a practical book with many techniques and ideas to apply in your specific situations. It aims to support professionals that want to improve their impediment handling skills.

Using the Book

There are many suggestions and pieces of advice in this book that help you to deal with impediments effectively. I marked them as tips with a key symbol:

Try those tips that look suitable and see if they work for you. If they do, great! If not, try another one.

I also share stories and cases from my own experience. They are from organizations and teams that I have worked with, as well as from my training and coaching sessions:

Stories, cases, and examples, have a user symbol. They inspire you to think about what you might do.

Reading suggestions for this book and information about additional tools, books, and services, are marked with QR codes or an exclamation mark:

Registration at benlinders.com/problem-what-problem gives you access to supporting materials, games, and workshops, that can help you to improve your impediment handling skills. Highly recommended!

Register your book today to get a discount on the impediment games!

With plenty of ideas, suggestions, examples, and practical cases on impediments, this book will help you to become more effective in dealing with impediments.

Dealing with Impediments in Teams

This chapter provides an approach for teams to effectively deal with impediments. It's supported by practices and examples to use in your daily work.

Handling impediments in teams consist of:

- Recognizing impediments.
- Understanding how they hinder teams.
- Exploring effective solutions to deal with them.
- Deciding how to solve and who takes action.

The "process" steps listed above may suggest doing one after another. That works well in most situations. But this is by no means intended to be a waterfall-like process.

Usually, the steps for handling impediments take little time. Sometimes teams can go through all steps within an hour or less. Different team members can also do steps in parallel while collaborating to align their results.

An impediment came up in one of my retrospectives with a dispersed team: Team members felt that they missed opportunities to chat about things not directly related to the work or team. Co-located teams would have such chats during lunch or at the coffee machine. We decided to add a "virtual coffee machine" to our Trello board. Directly after the retrospective, a picture of a coffee machine appeared, together with a first note ... many great discussions followed.

In the case of distributed teams, members can spend some time when being online together to clarify any questions or problems they may have. These meetings also help in building rapport among the members. They also help to build relationships between team members and improve team cohesiveness.

When your team works in an agile way they can do short-cycle improvements to deal with impediments. The aim is to decide when to solve problems. For example, to do it now or assign it to the next sprint (when using Scrum), or assign a suitable priority (when using Kanban).

> In one retrospective, the team agreed on an action point to change their way of working. In the sprint planning that they did on the same day, they identified new tasks and stopped doing activities that had not been effective. This solved their action point. Two weeks later at the end of the iteration, they did the next retrospective and concluded that things were going much better.

There are always possibilities to work on your impediments, for example:

- Teams can work on one or more impediments in their retrospectives. For instance, if they discover that they have had major problems that they need to get out of the way.
- Teams can do one or more of the steps during their daily meeting or afterward to handle the impediments that they have.
- If needed, teams can schedule a separate meeting to explore one or more impediments. Meeting facilitators can help teams coming up with actions to deal with them.

If teams appear to be stuck in one step they can decide to proceed to the next one. Then they should prepare themselves to go back and repeat the steps once they have more information.

Recognizing Impediments

Let's dive into the first step for dealing with impediments: picking up signals and recognizing impediments.

Recognizing that there might be an impediment is a very important step. Often there is only a signal, so you have to be a good listener to notice it and pick it up.

> At the daily meeting, somebody mentioned that she thought that the story that she was working on was "done", but she said she wasn't sure. Instead of ignoring her remark and moving the story to done, I asked what made her unsure. It turned out that she had a question on how the feature will be used. After the meeting, she discussed it with the product owner and was able to properly finish the story.

The things below are examples of signals that you can hear on the work floor:

- The priorities are changing all the time, this isn't workable
- My work is done, I'm waiting for other people
- We don't have time to do this properly
- The R&D manager dropped in, we need to do other work
- I'm too busy, I can't join the daily meeting
- We can only deliver on time if we skip the retrospective

Be aware that the signals mentioned above are usually a symptom of deeper problems. They are not the problem itself (more on this in the section understanding how impediments hinder teams).

Signals aren't only what people say, they can also be what people do (or don't do). It can, for example, be subtle things in how people behave, how the work is being done, or how people collaborate.

A signal that there's something that prevents the team from getting stories to done might be a story with an inordinately longer cycle time than other similar stories. It could be a story that isn't completed in the sprint as intended (for teams using Scrum). This signal might indicate that there's something wrong with the definition of their stories.

To recognize a possible impediment, you have to become good at spotting things. Quoting Yogi Berra I'd say that "you can observe a lot by just watching".

One organization did evaluations at the end of each project. The evaluations revealed similar problems like insufficient time and lack of people. These problems often were there from the start of the project, but it usually took a couple of months before they were reported. People were so busy with their daily work that they couldn't step back to take distance and see what was actually happening in the project.

Where most teams are able to recognize blockers, they may miss out on impediments. Blockers are easier to spot as they stop an activity, where other types of impediments often (gradually) slow things down.

As a team member, it can help to stop what you are doing and take a look at what you are doing and how you are doing it. Watching can be enough, look at how you work together as a team, how you plan and track your work, the practices that you apply, and use any feedback that you have.

Do these signals mentioned before sound familiar? That wouldn't surprise me. When I teach teams to become more effective in handling impediments, I see a lot of nodding in the classroom when I mention such signals.

I created the Impediment Coaching Cards which I often use in my workshop. These cards contain sentences with signals that teams can discuss to identify and learn about possible impediments that they face.

There have been several times where somebody stated in one of my workshops that they heard or saw something similar to these signals yesterday or in the past week at work.

What I've learned is that, when you hear signals like the ones listed above, you need to stop and make time to dig deeper to find out what's really happening.

Sometimes I meet people that do not want to hear bad news. Some managers say to me, "I hired you to solve problems, not to bring them up!" But remember:

Be aware that ignoring problems doesn't make them go away.

If there's a problem, when would teams like to know? Usually as soon as possible, to limit potential damage and not waste time. Solving problems before they get out of hand is usually also cheaper and much more effective.

A practice recommended by some agile coaches is to maintain an impediment log or separate impediment board. I worry that such a way of separating impediments from the work that is being done may lead to giving a lower priority to solving those impediments. There should be only one backlog and one task board; impediments should be included to give them the attention they deserve.

There has to be a mindset in the organization that "having a problem is not a problem". As Jack Sparrow said in Pirates of the Caribbean:

> The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem. Do you understand?

Don't shoot the messenger! We should not blame people when they bring up problems. When people don't feel safe enough to bring up problems, you're missing out on key information, risks, or issues. Instead, embrace the messenger by fostering a generative culture where people feel safe to raise problems.

At a conference that I attended, I heard a presenter state that "at our company, we never shoot the messenger, unless (s)he is late". Even in that case, I would not shoot the messenger, but I may want to do a root cause analysis to find out why it took so long.

Some problems teams can solve themselves, for other problems they will need help from outside of the team. But before we can decide who can take action, we first need to understand the problem. This is the topic of the next section.

Summing up, if teams want to deal with impediments then team members need to keep their ears and eyes open to catch any signals that are there. Make it very clear that people (inside or outside the team) can go to any team member if something is bothering them or when they see a problem.

Buy the book!

What you are reading is a sample of the book Problem? What Problem? If you like it, why not buy the full book?

The book is available in many online bookstores:

- My webshop
- Leanpub
- Amazon paperback
- Amazon Kindle
- Other book stores

Agile Coaching Tools for Impediments

Agile coaching tools are digital products that you can download and print out. These are exercises, coaching cards, and games, that I use myself in my workshops and advice work.

You can use them to coach professionals, teams, and organizations in improving their performance and the value that they deliver.

Download agile coaching tools for a nominal fee directly from BenLinders.com/shop. Use them to coach professionals, teams, and organizations in improving their performance and the value that they deliver.

The book Problem? What Problem? has been first released on Leanpub.

The full package of Problem? What Problem? on Leanpub includes both the Impediment Coaching Cards and the Impediment Board Game.

Agile Impediments Coaching Tools

Teams and organizations use the Impediment Coaching Cards to improve their impediment handling skills and learn how to apply agile practices effectively.

Practice how to recognize and analyze impediments, understand how they hinder your team, and decide what to do and who can

take appropriate action by deploying agile and lean principles and good practices.

Teams use the Impediment Board Game to learn how to collaboratively recognize and deal with impediments and improve their impediment handling skills.

The game uses concepts from gamification to create an environment where teams practice recognizing and analyzing impediments. By discussing impediments they increase their understanding of how they hinder the team. Next, they learn to decide what they can do and who can take appropriate action by deploying agile and lean principles and good practices.

Register your book to get access to supporting materials and download agile coaching tools for dealing with impediments with a discount at benlinders.com/problem-what-problem.

Training and Support

There are several ways to get trained on solving impediments: Remote training or coaching or public or in-house workshops.

My training and coaching sessions are highly interactive. You'll learn things that you can apply directly in your daily work.

I provide Free Lifetime Support on everything that I do and all products sold on my website to help you use what I deliver in your specific situation. Register your book to receive Free Lifetime Support at benlinders.com/problem-what-problem.

Remote Training and Coaching

Remote training, mentoring, and coaching are one-on-one intensive sessions on a topic of your choice. You get just-in-time maximum value with limited time investment.

For remote coaching, I use video and audio connection (Skype, Hangout, or likewise). You get materials upfront to prepare for a session and get support from me after the session.

Workshops

I provide workshops, master classes, and training sessions, where people gain new insights, try out practices and techniques, and learn to apply them effectively in their own specific situation.

In the workshop Making Agile Work for You you will learn how to apply agile practices to develop the right products, deliver faster, increase quality, and become a happy high-performing team!

The workshop Improving Organizational Agility teaches you how to apply agile throughout your organization by changing the culture, mindset, and improve in small but meaningful steps.

In the Workshop Valuable Agile Retrospectives for Teams you will practice different kinds of retrospectives and learn how to adapt and apply retrospectives in your own organization.

Doing it yourself and reflecting, that is the way people learn new practices and develop skills in my workshops. For up to date information about my workshops, please visit benlinders.com/workshops.

Agility Assessments

I can help you to assess your agility and increase value delivered:

- In-house workshops playing the Agile Self-assessment Game.
- Public workshops that include the Agile Self-assessment Game.
- Facilitated self-assessments for teams or the organization.
- Remote or on-site training for facilitating self-assessments.
- Facilitating assessments at your event (conference, meetup, hackathon, game lab, etc.).
- Tailoring the Agile Self-assessment Game to specific needs

I'm a senior adviser and coach with more than thirty years of experience in software development and management. I'm there to guide you through your agile journey and help you increase your agility to deliver more value to your customers and stakeholders.

For the latest information about my self-assessment services, see Assessing your Agility.

About the Author

Ben Linders: Trainer / Coach / Adviser / Author / Speaker

Ben Linders is an Independent Consultant in Agile, Lean, Quality, and Continuous Improvement, based in The Netherlands.

Author of Getting Value out of Agile Retrospectives, Waardevolle Agile Retrospectives, What Drives Quality, The Agile Self-assessment Game, Problem? What Problem? and Continuous Improvement. Creator of many Agile Coaching Tools, for example, the Agile Self-assessment Game.

Ben is a well-known speaker and author; he's much respected for sharing his experiences and helping others share theirs. His books and games are translated into more than 12 languages and are used by professionals in teams and organizations all around the world.

What I do

I'm a one-person company doing many different things to help people, teams, and companies become better in developing and delivering high-quality software products and services.

In my books, workshops, advice, and coaching sessions, I focus on adopting agile ways of working, increasing agility, dealing with impediments, collaboration and communication, continuous improvement, and keeping retrospectives valuable.

I'm a practical person who wants to have a real impact and make the world a little bit better. I look for ways to apply things, share experiences, and help people experiment and learn.

I share my experiences in a bilingual blog (Dutch and English), as an editor for Culture and Methods at InfoQ, and as an expert in communities like Computable, Quora, DZone, and TechTarget.

You can follow me on twitter: @BenLinders or contact me by email: benlinders@gmail.com.

Bibliography

My Blog and Books

Ben Linders - Sharing my Experience - www.benlinders.com

Getting Value out of Agile Retrospectives - A Toolbox of Retrospective Exercise

What Drives Quality - A Deep Dive into Software Quality with Practical Solutions for Delivering High-Quality Products

The Agile Self-assessment Game - The Agile Coaching Tool For Improving Your Agility

Problem? What Problem? - Dealing Effectively with Impediments using Agile Thinking and Practices

Continuous Improvement - A toolbox for Scrum masters and Agile Coaches to increase agility

Tools for Root Cause Analysis

Register your copy of this book at benlinders.com/problem-what-problem/

Books (Ordered on Title)

Creating Great Teams - How Self-Selection Lets People Excel by Sandy Mamoli and David Mole.

Create Your Successful Agile Project by Johanna Rothman.

iTeam: Putting the 'I' Back into Team by William E. Perry.

The Lean Startup - How Constant Innovation Creates Radically Successful Businesses by Eric Ries.

The Secrets of Consulting by Jerry Weinberg.

The Technology Takers by Jens P. Flanding, Genevieve M. Grabman, and Sheila Q. Cox.

Value Planning by Tom Gilb.

Links

Manifesto for Agile Software Development

Agile Self-assessment Game

Agile Self-assessment Tools and Checklists

Agile Coaching Tools