

Sinking Ship

Goal: understand prioritisation

Timing?

15-30 minutes

What do I need?

The names (with or without corresponding photographs) of 10-15 celebrities. Try and collate a range of celebrities including controversial (e.g. Lance Armstrong), deceased (Nelson Mandela), old (e.g. Stephen Hawking) and young (e.g. Justin Bieber).

So how do you play?

1. Set the scene that there is a cruise-liner with a number of famous people on board who are now in mortal danger as the boat has hit an iceberg and is sinking. Inform players that we don't know how long it will be until the boat has sunk. The good news is that we have a rescue boat and can be heroes by rescuing the celebrities. The bad news is that our rescue boat is small - we can only rescue one person at a time.
2. Task players to work together as a team and list the celebrities in the order in which they would rescue them. Set them a time limit of 10 minutes.

What do we learn?

- Some teams will fail to agree on an order. In this case, everyone dies. Here the learning point is that, in agile, almost any decision is better than no decision.
- Teams will often agree on the top 3 or 4 and the bottom 3 or 4. It often isn't worth arguing too much about priority 1 vs. priority 2 as there is a good chance both will end up being done.
- Arguing about priorities 10-15 is also relatively pointless - the boat will probably have sunk by then anyway
- While rescuing person 1, you can still be thinking about who person 2 will be (i.e. you don't have to decide everything straight away)
- Once you have rescued person 1, you can get some feedback on your decision and potentially change your mind about who you rescue next
- Most teams will decide on a set of criteria for determining their order (e.g. women and children first, or value of contribution to society). Agile projects also require this type of understanding (it is often captured in the project vision) - things become easier then.
- Prioritisation is subjective - there is no getting away from that

Variations to the game...

- Instead of pre-printing the celebrities, ask each player to think of a famous person (that is still alive) and use these names instead - this can help increase success as the players will have a greater connection with the celebrities and so be more engaged with the exercise
- Instead of celebrities, work with household items that would be useful in a survival situation of your choosing (e.g. gaffer tape that could be used to make repairs and build slings etc.)

