

The Various Styles of Standup Meetings

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The most visible star of the Agile galaxy is, without any doubt, the famous, the dreaded, the hyped, the all mighty standup meeting. During the early ages of Agile, from 2005 to 2010, every company I have worked at interpreted the meaning and purpose of the words “standup meeting” according to their own experience, culture, and most importantly, their hierarchy.

In this article I will describe the various styles of standup meetings I’ve experienced in my career. The words “cargo cult” don’t even start to convey the levels of weird I’ve witnessed in some places.

Oh, and before you ask, yes, all of these stories are true.

- The Expensive
- The Noisy
- The Irrelevant
- The Micromanagerial
- The Expeditive

The Expensive

In my first job where I experienced the standup meeting around the mid 2000s, they decided that the whole software development department had to participate in such ceremony every morning.

In practical terms, this meant 25 people would sit for an hour and a half in a meeting room, where each person would tell in excruciatingly detail during three minutes what they had done the day before, what they were planning to do that day, and what issues they were facing. Some people would jump in and start criticizing decisions done by others, or even discuss about code or implementation details right in the middle of the meeting.

The problem was that not everyone was working on the same parts of the final product; therefore, most of the discussions were strictly and utterly irrelevant to most of the attendees.

Every day, 25 people earning salaries above 10'000 CHF per month, sitting in a room for 90 minutes. Total estimated cost: around 2'300 CHF per day, or

46'000 CHF per month, or, yes, half a million per year.

Oh, and our product was two years late.

The Noisy

At some other place, we had our standup meeting in our big open space. The problem was that said open space was located next to the cafeteria, and for some reason, somebody had decided to have our standup meeting at precisely the same time all the rest of the company had their “znüni” break (that’s the official name of the 9 AM coffee break in the German side of Switzerland).

A big cacophony ensued, with a dozen engineers screaming at one another to be heard, while the coffee machines were working at full throttle, with around 40 people meeting to chat and laugh.

And to add insult to injury, given the chosen time, of course we missed the coffee break with our colleagues every single day.

To fix this obviously wrong timing choice, the CEO complained to our managers that we were screaming during the “znüni”. Everyone has their own priorities in life.

So our manager decided, mostly to ensure his progression in the ranks of the company, to move the meeting to a closed room. But the office manager had previously decided that this meeting room required a table in the middle. Lo and behold, they requested a table that was so big, we literally had to sit on top of it to make room for everyone to enter the room and close the door. So much for a standup meeting, sitting on top of a big table.

Furniture police later asked us not to sit on that table anymore because we risked scratching it. So we stood next to the door, very awkwardly.

Four months later they removed the table, and we finally had a standup meeting with everyone actually standing up, and without anyone screaming, for the first time.

The Irrelevant

In another job our CEO joined the IT team standup meeting, and would literally read, from his smartphone calendar app, the agenda of the previous day, providing details of every meeting and every lunch and every single prospect in the CRM.

Then it would swipe on his smartphone with a finger, and repeat the experience, but this time for the current day. All in all, 10 minutes.

The rest of the team, all engineers, would then spend 10 seconds each simply saying whether they had a problem or not.

Which was useless, since all of us were working on different stuff, without the slightest intersection in our duties. There was, simply put, nothing to coordinate.

The Micromanagerial

Since the Agile Manifesto was published, lots of managers all over the world thought the standup meeting was just another great mechanism of fine-grained control.

In such minds, the purpose of a standup meeting is none other than the direct measure of productivity of each employee involved, with little or no interest in the actual ideas behind the word “Agile”. Like, you know, having small autonomous teams that can decide by themselves how to work in the best possible way by collaborating with one another, and stuff like that.

In such situation, our boss would ask us for the reasons behind each gap between commits in the repositories we were working on. Why did your change take a whole afternoon? Why did you create a separate branch? How many tests did you write? Why didn’t you reply to my email before leaving home? Why did you leave so early, by the way? And so on and so forth. This was also sprinkled with the shaming of those who were not being productive enough, according to the narrow views of this manager.

The existence and survival of this simulation of an agile structure prompted this manager to also forbid all remote working, because, well, micromanagement.

More than a “standup meeting” it was a “standup interrogation”; like a “good cop, bad cop” routine, but without the good cop.

The Expeditive

Last but not least, at my team in VSHN we adopted a remote-friendly version of the standup meeting way before the pandemic struck. A quick one-liner on the team chat, saying what’s in our plate for the day, and asking for help if required.

One line, 30 seconds max, every day. It works very well for us. We have a 45 minute-long weekly meeting every week on Monday to coordinate actions, anyway, so such a short standup meeting is more than enough in our opinion.

Other teams in VSHN use other kinds of standup meetings, and I know that some of them have changed the schedule, modality, and requirements of the meeting, according to their wishes.