Backlog on the floor

Improving the Backlog in a collaborative exercise. The goal is to improve the Product Backlog and creating a shared understanding of why this is so important.

It help to face questions like:

- What happens, if everything is important?
- If we start work based on technical reasons and not based on the users, customers and other business-side stakeholders in mind, how do we know it's the right thing?

By using the following activities, you can facilitate to get to a shared understanding and a better backlog.

Printouts - Make the upcoming work tangible

In order to get a sense of the upcoming work and in order to create a shared understanding between all involved people, we print in this exercise the upcoming work items out.
Electronic tools give us comfort feature to filter and search. This support us to maintain and view our own items, but often scarifies the overall view of the upcoming work.
In this way electronic tools easily hide the fragmentation and contradictions of the upcoming work.

Printout the work items

- Put each work items on one page
- Format the informations in a way, that it is easily readable in a collaborative exercise
- Put the work in priority on the ground

Unique Order

Even if the work is put in priority on the ground. The priorities are clusters of work, with many items in the first cluster and the second. This avoids conflicts and discussion, because my items are on the most important position. Still, if we are late and we have 20 items in this cluster and we can only do 4, we have to make a decision. The clusters just defer a decisions, which we should have as early as possible. A uniquely ordered Backlog fosters needed discussion on what is really important earlier.

Bring the Backlog in a unique order

- Argument, that we need to bring the Backlog in a unique order.
  The team will pull one item after one another and if we don't make the decision explicitly, they select it just based on their preferences
- Ask the people, if they could put them in a unique order
  Often the participants resist to start, because they feel not comfortable in changing this priorities
- Make the initial ordering (as a first proposal)
  Just put the items below one another
- Let them move items and share why they need to change priorities,
  till nothing moves

Value trumps fragmented task

In an agile way of working, we are focusing the create value. Based on this the items in a Backlog should help to create value and not just be a task, which only create value with other tasks. If the value is fragmented between multiple tasks, we need to finish all of them to deliver value. It gets even worse, if this tasks are fragmented over the backlog.

Check for value

Ask for the top items on

- Do they create value on their own?
- Is it demonstrable functionality?
- What other items needs to be implemented in order to have something valuable and demonstrable

If needed cluster the items to one item and write a one page summary for the new item.

Shared understanding of Priority

In order to maintain the Backlog together (with the Team and the Stakeholders) effectively, we need a shared understanding on what makes upcoming items important.

Make importance explicit

- Discuss in small groups, which factor make the top items important and the others less
- Make a list of 3-5 criteria as guidance for importance

Risk & Preparation

In order to deal most effective and proactively with risks and needed preparation, we should create a shared understanding of it.

Mark Risks & needed preparation

- Ask for different type of risks and preparation, we should make explicit.
  Use for each of them a different colored post-it.
- Let the participants walk through the Backlog in small groups
  Discuss the items & make the risks and preparation accordningly

Sizing of the Backlog

The Backlog should contain the right size. Concrete and small enough to take action on the top. Bigger to the bottom to defer commitment and maintain a good overview

Split on the top and cluster on the bottom

- Based on the newly clustered work, items on the top might be too big. Split them to create earlier valuable versions or at least to create earlier increments, which give us valuable feedback on the product. Splitting patterns can support to create effective smaller items.
- Cluster smaller items to the bottom in themes to keep a better overview