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Lessons From the Field

PART 2: ACTIVE FEEDBACK

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My most recent article was a rousing success story of prioritization, decomposition, and the ability to adapt. Today I'd like to shed some light on how successful practice of these three concepts doesn't guarantee smooth sailing. It was during this same project that we started focusing on what we call "active feedback".

Active feedback is simple concept. Ask your stakeholders (or anyone receiving information) to state back what you just told them and how it will impact them. In the past, our approach had been to ask our stakeholders if what we said made sense. You can see how this leaves room for misinterpretation. Since implementing the technique of active feedback, we have seen a significant reduction in misunderstandings.

To recap, the project I'm referring to was an iOS mobile application for field service reps who did commercial repair visits. We were working on building a set of features to improve efficiencies and increase the accuracy of the

services being provided. Ultimately, these features would lead to an increased profit margin for each visit.

Around this same time, the division of the company we were working with was sold to another organization. This meant our client was required to undergo a complete branding change. Our Product Owner (PO), based on his understanding of stakeholder priorities, re-prioritized this branding work over the profit margin work that we had been doing.

The PO and team did an amazing job of reacting to this change, ensuring the backlog was ready and updating the release plan to reflect the new work. In a sense, the reaction to this change in priority was itself an example of how effective a team can be in making a change when everything is setup for it.

The change was reflected in the release plan and reviewed at every sprint demo. Because of this, we all felt that it was

clear what the impacts to this change were. The trouble was that our stakeholders did not fully understand these impacts. They had heard us discuss them, but as happens to us all, had not entirely processed their true meaning. We found that the rebranding work was not the top priority during an informal discussion with their CEO who said, “I would have never wanted the branding to trump those profit margin changes”.

It would have been easy for us to simply chalk this up to poor listening, but in the end the burden of clarity is on us. We began to adopt our “active feedback” technique during meetings with our execution teams, proposals, demos, and release plans with our customers and stakeholders. We’ve been surprised by how often our message wasn’t received correctly the first time; you might be too!

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