

CASE STUDY:

When Agile Training Meets Skepticism: Changing Minds Through Collaboration

Organization & Role Context

A delivery team within a mid-sized technology organization engaged Mountain Goat Software for training and coaching. The organization was navigating recent restructuring and delivery challenges.

The engagement included:

- Working on a Scrum Team
- Better User Stories
- Coaching

The team was not new to Scrum and agile. However, recent organizational changes had brought frequent shifts in direction, changing priorities, and change fatigue.

Leadership wanted to invest in strengthening the team's agile capability, but there was skepticism about whether more training would make a meaningful difference.

Challenges Before Training

Change Fatigue: Work was often interrupted by last-minute changes. Team members described feeling unable to focus on a single objective long enough to complete it well.

Technical Debt and Rework: There was frustration around the difficulty of addressing technical debt, particularly when business stakeholders did not fully understand its impact.

Unclear Success Definitions: Teams sometimes believed work was complete, only to find that expectations had changed or the "finish line" had moved.

Unclear Business Value and Priorities: Top priorities were not always clearly communicated or backed by data. Teams hesitated to commit to delivery goals because experience suggested that scope would shift.

Limited Product Ownership: The team felt they did not have active, empowered product ownership. As a result, teams often made prioritization decisions themselves without clear guidance.

Training Experience

The energy in the room was cautious. Before any formal instruction began, the trainers introduced two collaborative exercises:

- A continuous “start, stop, continue” board that participants could update throughout the week.
- A “Common Problems” exercise where the team identified blockers, rated their severity and frequency, and surfaced what was genuinely getting in the way of doing their best work.

Once problems were identified, along with ideas of practices to stop, start, or continue, the training repeatedly referenced them, tying Scrum concepts directly back to the challenges.

By addressing real problems rather than leading with theory, participants began to see themselves as partners in the process, not just recipients of information.

Key Takeaway Methods

Experiential Learning

An in-person Scrum simulation exercise helped the team experience inspection and adaptation in real time. Rather than describing iteration, improvement, and flow, the exercise allowed them to feel it. For many participants, this helped move Scrum from abstract framework to a practical tool.

Clear Guidance on Stories

When training the team on user stories, INVEST criteria, job stories, and SPIDR-based splitting, participants appreciated having:

- Concrete guidelines for what makes a good story
- A checklist to validate story quality
- Practical techniques for breaking down large work

Splitting techniques sparked strong discussion. Questions about spikes, estimation, and breaking down backlog items led to conversations about how they currently worked and what could improve.

Coaching and Consolidation

The final coaching day focused on reinforcing tools and applying them directly to the team’s real work. Rather than leaving with abstract principles, the team left with:

- Clearer thinking around technical debt conversations
- Shared language around backlog quality
- Practical splitting techniques
- A better understanding of when and why to estimate
- A clearer path forward grounded in their own identified problems

Impact

By the end of the engagement, the tone in the room was more optimistic. The problems hadn't disappeared. But the team described seeing "a way through them."

Rather than viewing agile as something imposed from above, the team began discussing how they could iterate on their own approach.

One team leader summarized the week by noting that they had expected either a rigid, by-the-book approach or an uphill battle to make the content relevant. Instead, they experienced a practical, collaborative process that left them with usable tools and a clearer direction.

Why a Collaborative Approach Matters

When teams are skeptical, it doesn't mean they're unwilling to improve. Instead, it's often because previous training was disconnected from real delivery challenges.

At Mountain Goat Software, when we work with teams, we:

- Start with the team's actual problems
- Continuously reference those problems throughout the training
- Balance mindset with practical techniques
- Provide clear, usable tools rather than abstract principles
- Reinforce learning with coaching and applied discussion

Looking Ahead

By grounding the training in real issues and reinforcing it with applied coaching, the team left with practical tools and a shared understanding of how to move forward.