Some instructions for running a stand-up meeting

In chapter 22 "The Character of Full Production," in the section "Stand-Up Meetings," I talk about this useful team communication activity, and describe some of its essential characteristics. I say, "You can read more about stand-up meetings on this book's website, playfulproductionprocess.com," so here are some detailed instructions for running your won stand-up meetings.

If you're not already running stand-up meetings as a regular part of your game development practice, the beginning of the full production phase of a project is a great time to start.

What is a Stand-Up Meeting?

A stand-up meeting is a group-based communication activity, designed to help teams of people stay in regular touch about their accomplishments, goals, and problems, with the aim of keeping the project moving forward smoothly. The meeting is held standing up, which is intended to keep the meeting short. It's a clever hack, since people naturally want to sit back down, and that reminds everyone to keep their comments in the meeting brief and to-the-point.

Stand-up meetings are important and ubiquitous in the world of Agile software development, where you'll sometimes find them called the "morning rollcall meeting," the "daily scrum," or just the "daily meeting."

How Does a Stand-Up Meeting Work?

Stand-up meetings follow a set pattern defined by some rules. I'll tell you the rules that I use, but you should feel free to adapt them for your project and team.

- **Update the Burndown Chart.** If it doesn't delay the start of the stand-up meeting, each team updates their burndown chart with the progress that they made since the last stand-up. By doing this before every meeting, the burndown chart will be updated frequently—which is very important if it's going to be useful.

- **Stand Up!** Everyone in the group who can stand should stand up, usually in a circle where everyone can see each other. The mild discomfort of standing reminds people to keep the meeting short—but there are potential issues with this, as we'll see later.

- **Start a Timer.** Since the goal is always to get through the stand-up meeting as quickly as possible, we can make a game of it. At the beginning of the meeting, you can start a timer to record the length of the meeting, so that we can try to beat our own best time, or that of other teams.

- **Pick Someone to Go First.** It doesn't matter how you pick. The important thing is to start as quickly as possible.

- **The Three Questions.** Going around the group person by person, each team member answers the famous "three questions" of stand-up meetings, answering them all in one go, one after the other. Sometimes people will pass around an object like a plush toy or a ball, to remind us that only one person should speak at a time. The three questions are:

    - What did you work on since we last met?
    - What do you plan to work on before our next meeting?
    - What problems are you facing that are blocking your forward progress?

    Each individual team member answers these questions for themselves, saying what they did as an individual contributor, rather than on behalf of the team. These three simple questions encapsulate a huge amount about the project and its progress.

    Checking in about what you have just done, and what you're about to do, helps to build clarity on a team about who is actively working on what, and what will come next. It is shockingly easy for teams to drift apart in their understanding of who is doing what. People change their minds about what they're going to work on, get sidetracked, or hit a problem that they must solve. Answering the first two questions often goes very quickly, with a few caveats that we'll discuss in a moment.

The third question—what problems are you facing?—can be the most important of the three questions. When we quickly and concisely summarize the problems (sometimes known as impediments or blockers) that we're facing in completing our work, we do at least three things:

1) we identify that there's a problem,

2) we may get a little clearer about the exact nature of the problem simply by describing it out loud to somebody, and

3) we create an opportunity to get some help with that problem.

Again, it's easy for even a very small team to fail to have ongoing discussions about the problems blocking their forward process. People tend to struggle through, reluctant to ask for help, thinking that they should be able to figure out challenges themselves. The stand-up meeting forces us to get the problems that we're facing on the table.

Whenever someone identifies a problem that they're facing, then it's time to look around the group, to see if anyone can offer help with solving the problem. If anyone in the group thinks they can help, they offer to do so, and the discussion will continue *after* the stand-up meeting has finished.

- **Avoid Problem Solving and Storytelling During the Stand-Up Meeting.** It's very important to avoid discussing how to fix a problem during the stand-up meeting. Stand-up meetings are meant to promote follow-up conversations that take place later, and to identify challenges before they become too problematic, but to get into the details of any issue, when not everyone present is interested or has anything to offer, is a waste of valuable person-minutes.

  Similarly, when we're answering any of the three questions, we should avoid "storytelling." You'll recognize storytelling in a stand-up meeting as soon as you hear it: instead of just quickly and concisely saying what they worked on or plan to work on, some people will launch into an evocative description of their week, the things that led them to decide to work on what they worked on, or maybe a story about how the work unfolded. While it may be important to discuss all this at another time, it's not appropriate during a stand-up meeting.

We just want the facts about what was done, what will be done next, and the problems that have arisen, described as concisely as possible.

- **Use the Two Hand Rule.** A good way to combat problem solving and storytelling during the stand-up meeting is to use the "two hand rule" described by Benjamin Mitchell in his blog post, "Stuck in an overlong Agile stand up? Try the two hands rule."[1] When the current speaker is speaking, if anyone in the group thinks that they have gone off-topic, then they raise their hand. If two people in the group raise their hand, then the speaker is obliged to wrap up their comments and move on to answering the next question. The speaker can continue the discussion with the interested parties after the stand-up meeting.

  Be careful, respectful, and kind when using this method, though. As Benjamin warns, "It can feel direct or confrontational, especially when people first experience it. It's important to discuss any issues after the stand up and consider reviewing the practice in a retrospective."[2]

- **Go Around the Group.** After the first individual in the group has answered the three questions, then it's time for the next person in the group to do so. Remember, we're answering the three questions for ourselves as individuals, and not on behalf of our whole team.

- **Check the Burndown Charts/"Walk the Board."** When everyone has answered the three questions, then it's time to look at the infographics in the burndown chart, to check our progress. If we're using a method of tracking our progress other than a burndown chart, then we should check in on it, and this may correspond to "walking the board" in some Agile practices.

  What we hope to see is that we're staying on schedule. If we're not, then that's a problem that needs some offline discussion. The project is probably over scope, and some tasks may have to be deprioritized or removed from our task list.

- **Signal the End with a Cheer!** When everyone has spoken, and we've checked the burndown charts or walked the board, the stand-up meeting is over. To signal our success, and the

[1] Benjamin Mitchell, "Stuck in an Overlong Agile Stand up? Try the Two Hands Rule," Benjamin Mitchell's Blog (blog), February 23, 2012, https://blog.benjaminm.net/2012/02/23/overlong-agile-stand-up-two-hand-rule/.
[2] Mitchell, "Stuck in an Overlong Agile Stand up?".

beginning of the next block of work, some teams like to end with a cheer. It might be a simple "go team!" or maybe a round of high-fives. This simple ritual can create a nice formal ending to the meeting, but if you think it's too cheesy, then skip it.

- **Stop the Timer and Record How Long the Stand-Up Meeting Took.** If you're timing your stand-ups, then note down the duration of the meeting and see if the team beat their own best time (or the time of any other groups doing a stand-up meeting). Keep it playful and light: we're not competing aggressively, just promoting healthy habits with a bit of fun.

How Often Do Stand-Up Meetings Take Place?

On professional teams, it's common for stand-up meetings to take place every working day. It's traditional that the meeting should take place at the same time and in the same place every single day, usually towards the beginning of the day, which promotes a regular, steady rhythm of continual discussion and update. Whatever your setting, hold stand-up meetings as often as you can, and note that the meeting should take place even if not all the team members are present. Don't delay the meeting for someone who is late or absent.

Why Keep Stand-Up Meetings So Short?

Stand-up meetings are always kept as short as possible, to facilitate communication in a very time-efficient way. In the Agile process framework known as Scrum, stand-up meetings are timeboxed (limited) to fifteen minutes. Stand-up meetings have a focus on "just the facts" (supplemented by follow-up conversations) which means that they result in a very high rate of knowledge transfer, and they tend to promote close working relationships.

As we work on a game, we naturally develop a body of shared knowledge on our team: both general knowledge about good game development practices, and specific knowledge that relates to the design and implementation of the particular game that we're building. Stand-up meetings help us to propagate both kinds of knowledge around our team in an efficient way.

What a Stand-Up Meeting is Not

It's important to note that a stand-up meeting is *not* an opportunity to update the studio management or stakeholders in the project about the project's progress. That would take place in a different meeting. A stand-up meeting is an opportunity for the team members to have a candid and open conversation about how the project is progressing. It's not a status report to the bosses.

If we tried to get the stand-up meeting to do "double duty" as a team check-in *and* a report to the people overseeing the project, then some good aspects of the stand-up meeting would be lost. People might be less likely to be candid, to communicate openly, or to inventory all the problems they face.

Problems with Stand-Up Meetings

There's one obvious problem with stand-up meetings, which is that they have the potential to be ableist—to discriminate against people with disabilities. They don't work well for people who can't stand, or who have difficulty standing, perhaps because of chronic pain. They might also be painful for people who feel anxious about speaking in front of a group.

I think that the best way to handle this is to raise it as an issue with a team before their very first stand-up meeting and invite discussion by the team members. There are other ways to keep a meeting short that would not create inequality on a team, like the use of a timer.

Sometimes people "tune out" during stand-up meetings, and don't pay attention to whoever is speaking. Maybe they're too busy thinking about what they're going to say when it's their turn or perhaps they only care about their own part of the project. This undermines the usefulness of the stand-up meeting, since the person who is checked out is missing opportunities to give and receive potentially important information.

It's usually pretty easy for everyone to spot when someone is tuned out, so the best way to deal with this problem is by noticing when it's happening and talking about it with the team, reminding everyone that it's important that we all pay attention to each other. If a particular individual is regularly tuning out, then a team leader should have a word with them privately, to remind them that it's important that we all pay attention and to ask them if something is preventing them from doing so. Sometimes simply being noticed and being seen as having an impact is enough to help someone make a positive change.

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Stand-up meetings are always valuable for keeping teams in synch, and you might want to run them from the very beginning of your project until the very end. I strongly recommend running stand-up meetings at least throughout full production. Remember that you can modify the structure of your stand-up meetings to whatever suits your team best. As Clinton Keith puts it, in describing the daily Scrum meeting: “As a team takes more ownership of how it works, it is free to modify the practice as long as the purpose of the meeting (status, commitment, and improvement) remains intact.”[3]

When they’re working well, stand-up meetings cultivate an atmosphere of respect, trust, and consent on a team, as we clearly communicate with each other about the work we’re doing, recognize everyone’s effort, and help each other through difficulties. This lays the groundwork for further discussions about our process, and to make sure that we’re all ok with the unfolding path of our shared endeavor. Stand-up meetings will supercharge the community of your team, if you just commit to this simple, time-efficient practice.

[3] Clinton Keith, Agile Game Development: Build, Play, Repeat, Second edition (Hoboken: Pearson Education, Inc, 2020), 85.