

Table of Contents

How Do We Setup An Organizational Impediment Removal System? - SSA	3
Why Have an Organizational Impediment Removal System?	3
What Are the Benefits of an Impediment Removal System?	4
How Do You Become Aware of Impediments?	5
How Will You Make It Safe for People to Raise Impediments?	5
How Do You Work Impediments?	6
<i>Characteristics</i>	6
<i>Example Approach</i>	7
Single Intake System	7
Transparency	7
Planning	8
How Will We Know We Are Making Progress on Impediment Removal?	9
Want to Know More?	9

How Do We Setup An Organizational Impediment Removal System? - SSA

One of the key roles of the manager or leader is to remove impediments to the flow of value. Impediments are defined as “anything that slows down the delivery of value”. Removing impediments means value is delivered faster to the customer. It also frees up capacity of the organization to work on what is important.

If just want to start something right now that will head you in the right direction, walk up to your people and ask “What impediments are you seeing right now?” Volunteer to take one of the impediments on (ie “pull” it), and work to resolve it. If your people are not able to tell you about their impediments, you might want to refer to the section below.

But to be fair, to be effective in the long run, you need to set up systematic approach to identifying, capturing and working impediments. This will involve structuring a process where, for example, impediments that are recognized by a Team, but cannot be dealt with by that Team, are escalated to someone who can do something about it.

Organizations typically set up “impediment” Kanban boards to track the resolution of impediments. This makes the process transparent and helps to set expectations. Working agreements are established around these Kanban boards - who does what and how often - so people can engage effectively. Metrics track both the outcomes and the work required to remove impediments.

Let's dig into some of these ideas a little deeper.

Why Have an Organizational Impediment Removal System?

“Work smarter; not harder”

But how exactly do you do this? It turns out there are a lot of ways to do this, but one of the best ways is to focus on removing things that slow the delivery of value down - impediments - across all the entire organization.

To understand why, consider that when people map out how they deliver value to their customers (a process called “Value Stream Mapping”) they find that their process efficiency is very poor. Process efficiency is calculated by dividing the value-added time associated with a process by the total lead time of the process.

Process Efficiency = Value-Added-Time / Lead Time

When you learn that process efficiency for IT systems is typically below 15% (that's right; only 15% value

added work!) you can see that if we focus on removing the 85% of waste time, we can speed up delivery to our customers dramatically.

Impediments are defined as “anything that will slow the delivery of value down.” Impediments are part of the overall system of delivery. They are often the result of “that’s just how things get done ‘round here”:

- Some are localized in nature and the Team can work them because they have the information and ability. For example, perhaps a Team has identified a “blocker” (the way work management tools often refer to impediments) whereby they need an approval to have access to a server, and there is a good relationship between the Team members and the person who provides access.
- Some are more systematic and will need a group of people from multiple domains to address. For example, perhaps there is a complicated process to release the solution to the customer which came about as a result of fears of bringing the system down.

Irrespective, it is the role of management to help Teams to deliver value by removing impediments. To do this they need to ensure that there is an impediment system in place aimed at working and removing impediments that have been identified by the organization.

What Are the Benefits of an Impediment Removal System?

There are a number of benefits to having an impediment removal system.

The first, and most obvious, benefit is that you should see the faster delivery of value to customers as a result of removing impediments. This is the direct result of the focus on improving process efficiency, resulting in reduced lead time for the customer and faster cycle time. These benefits typically compound; improve by 5% today, another 5% tomorrow and the effect is a 10.25% improvement overall, not just 10% (see [How Do Small Changes Lead to Big Improvements?](#) for further discussion). And as you remove impediments you will also free up capacity of your Teams to do valuable work; no longer do they have to waste time as a result of the impediment.

In addition, you should find that as an organization, you will improve how quickly you can improve. There will always be another systematic impediment. The focus on impediments will allow you to improve your ability to respond.

And finally, there is a soft benefit. This is how managers, supervisors, and leaders really help Teams, and so positions these roles in the overall delivery system. Teams will see the benefit of working with managers resulting in a virtuous cycle of constant engagement and improvement.

How Do You Become Aware of Impediments?

There are lots of potential sources for impediments, depending on the situation you find yourself in.

At the most basic level, Teams are encouraged to track things that slow them down. There are two main sources impediments:

- Tooling will provide for a “Blocker” tag, which the Team will use to signify that there is a problem progressing that particular work item. These will often be discussed at the Daily meeting, and can be identified at any time.
- Retrospective ceremonies aimed at Team improvement will often result in an understanding of something that slows the work down.

In most cases, Teams should be able to work these items themselves. But some issues will be more thorny, more political, more ingrained. In effect these items need to be “escalated”. This is where leadership needs to step in and take responsibility for working the impediment.

What happens with impediments that the Team cannot address will vary depending on context:

- If the Team works to deliver value by itself, then management associated with the Team takes these impediments on directly.
- If the Team operates as part of a Program (a Team-of-Teams) then the first level of escalation for Team impediments is to the Program Team to see if it can be addressed at that level.

This pattern repeats. The Program Team will also track Program level “Blockers” and operate Retrospective ceremonies (sometimes called an “Inspect and Adapt”) where Program level impediments are surfaced. Items that the Program Team cannot work are either escalated to the, say, Portfolio level (if there is one) or is worked directly by relevant management.

Another source of impediments is specific events aimed at improvement. For example, some organizations set up specific Kaizen events aimed at stepping back from the day-to-day work of the organization, to really work systematic improvements. Other organizations use Value Stream Mapping events to really help focus. And, over time, there will just be an increasing awareness of the things that are slowing things down.

No matter what the source we need to be careful about setting up a slow, cumbersome bureaucracy to address the discovered impediment. Speed of response is of the essence here.

How Will You Make It Safe for People to Raise Impediments?

Put yourself in the shoes of your people:

- Do you expect them to be open about impediments they having? Are your people concerned that if they bring up a problem that it will reflect poorly on them in the next performance assessment, for example?
- How have you worked impediments in the past?
 - Do you people feel pride and get rewarded for working around the impediment rather than removing the impediment?
 - Have impediments been around for years with everyone knowing that “no one is going to do anything about it anyway?”

In either case, is it safe for people in your system to raise up the impediments? How will you know if you have these problems? The main clue that you have a problem is that you don't see impediments. None. Or perhaps some very lightweight ones.

One thing to note. It is often difficult for people to see impediments as impediments as “that's how things get done around here.” Often they don't even notice that there is a problem or assume that there is no way to get around the problem; that they will just have to live with it.

How do you encourage the right behaviors from your people? Some ideas:

- Volunteer to work impediments: “pull” impediments to work to show you are serious you are about addressing these.
- Model expected behavior: Be open, transparent about what you are working on and the problems (impediments) you are facing.
- Encourage people to question everything: “Why do we have to get this approval?” “What does this have to take so long?” “Why do we have to do this?” Lead by example.
- Expect impediments: Continuously ask questions like “... in your last retrospective what impediments did you identify that I can help out with?”
- Be incremental in resolving the impediment: sometimes impediments are big and will take a long time to fully resolve. But many times you do not have to solve the problem completely in order the value delivery to speed up. Look at leveraging the 80:20 principle; find the 20% of the effort that will yield 80% of the result.
- Get back to people: ensure you get back to the folks that have the impediment and discuss progress on resolving the impediment. Be active; do not just wait until the impediment is fully resolved.
- Leverage out-of-the-box thinking approaches: For example, ask the Team or Program to determine what their ideal workflow is. See [How Do We Get Away from “Business as Usual” Thinking On Teams?](#) for more ideas here.

How Do You Work Impediments?

Characteristics

There is no one process to work impediments that will work in all cases. There are common characteristics of an impediment removal system:

1. Single intake system: There is a common way to capture the impediments. There is a good understanding of what kinds of impediments should flow to what parts of the organization. Note that you may have to process a few impediments to figure this out.
2. Transparency: There is a clear, visible-to-all, flow associated with resolving impediments.
3. Planning: There is clear understanding of current expectations for delivery and current priorities.
4. Metrics: On-going use of metrics to understand the impact of impediment removal.

Example Approach

Let us take these characteristics and apply them to set up an operational impediment removal system. For this case we are going to assume that this is a leadership team who are interested in improving the flow of value delivery across the entire organization.

Single Intake System

In this example, there are two sources of work for this group:

1. Cross-program impediments: Teams and Programs have not been able resolve the impediment and so it us up to the leadership team. An example might be “The corporate system security procedures require extensive documentation to pass, and forces development through a long approval cycle. This results in a delay of value delivery to our customers of up to 3 months per group of features delivered”.
2. Organizational impediments: These might be related to problems that the Leadership have identified themselves. An example might be “Our people are still being partially allocated to project work resulting in an inability to make and consistently meet commitments. This results in delays of value delivery when multiple people are required to get something out the door, and a loss of trust with our customers.”

The leadership team got together with some of their key stakeholders, in this case some Program Team members. They came to a working agreement about how they would take in impediments so there was a single view of all the impediments they need to work. They decided:

1. Program Team members and the Leadership Team are the primary source of impediments.
2. The format of an impediment is a description of the impediment (the “what”) including a view of who it effects, a description of the impact the impediment is having on the system of delivery (the “so what”), and the primary person interested in driving the discussion.
3. Impediments will all be recorded in a “Systematic Impediment Backlog” in the “boards” tool.

Transparency

The initial thought of the Leadership team was that they’d track and show their work in an Excel

spreadsheet. But then they realized that all their Teams are putting their work into a Kanban tool and that this practice enabled anyone who was interested in the work to see what the Team was up to.

The Leadership team pivoted, decided to put their work into Kanban board. They created a Kanban board called “Systematic Impediments”.

They then thought through how they’d like to work on impediments. This discussion leads a working agreement for the following Kanban states aimed at tracking an impediment through to resolution:

- Backlog: All new impediments here.
- Designing: Identify a number of potential ideas, experiments, aimed at reducing the effect of the impediment and improving resultant flow of value. The design includes a discussion of “how will we know” we are actually helping as well as a time box to review the results.
- Established: Ideas are now being actively tried. Perhaps two or three ideas for a particular impediment might be set up.
- Measuring: Data is being collected against each of the ideas. At the end of the time box, this data will be used to determine what to do next.
- Improving: Using the data, we know what ideas actually resulted in improvements. We then need to make sure that these ideas are operationalized.
- Done: Impediment is closed and we can move onto another impediment.

Like all Kanban systems, the Leadership team discussed WIP limits on the Kanban states. The Leadership team were understandably concerned that they would try to take on too much work, and not actually complete anything. They therefore set the WIP limits to 1 for “Designing”, and 3 for “Established” (multiple ideas as a result of a design process) and “Measuring”, and 1 for “Improving” (mainly to make sure this was done properly).

Planning

The Leadership team also established a number of additional working agreements:

- The backlog would be prioritized based on the importance to the system by the whole Leadership team “Backlog Refinement” meeting held every 2 weeks.
- Each impediment being worked had (2) co-leads identified. This was set up to spread the load of working these items. Co-leads are responsible for working the impediments and communicating with the relevant stakeholders.
- Leadership are expected to “pull” impediments work and, in particular, not simply wait for people to ask to address an issue.
- Every Tuesday and Thursday, the Leadership team would have a brief meeting to discuss how their work is going and address any problems they have.
- Every 2 weeks, the Leadership team would get together and discuss how to improve the impediment system they have put in place.

The only thing left for the Leadership team was to make sure that various stakeholders were aware of what they had set up.

How Will We Know We Are Making Progress on Impediment Removal?

The work of impediments is, in many ways, no different to the work involved in delivering solutions. The outcome has a different nature (improvement vs value) but the way it is worked is similar.

It should be no surprise that we can use the same kind of metrics to track the work on impediments as we'd use for any other work. Good metrics to start with include:

- (V)alue: What stakeholders get out of the work the team delivers. While there is nothing wrong with getting direct opinions from the stakeholders via, say, and Net Promoter Score survey for work completed, in many cases you will have a more direct understanding of the value delivered as a result of the metrics used to track which experiments help the most. And while you might not start with this metric, in the final analysis impediment removal is about increasing the efficiency of your delivery process - improving the flow of value delivered. A “before” and “after” (impediment removal) view of the delivery “value stream map” will help you understand the impact you are having.
- (O)utput: How much work the team delivers. Is the impediment team able to increase how many impediments are resolved over time - “Impediment Resolution Throughput”.
- (R)esponsiveness: How fast the team delivers resolution to impediments. Are we able to reduce the time required to resolve impediments - “Impediment Resolution Cycle Time” or “Impediment Resolution Lead Time”.

In addition, since there are potentially issues associated with our people raising impediments, we need to track the inflow of work. Are we seeing a “healthy pipeline” of impediments? In general, you should see more demand (more backlog of impediments) than supply (your ability to address the impediments.)

And finally, I've found that it is sometimes helpful to capture “man-hours saved” type metrics, and display this data very visibly in the office somewhere. This is something everyone can easily understand. Taking the example above, if we were able to work the security issue so that there was no documentation requirement (perhaps we have automated the process) then every time we release a new feature, we don't have to do that work, which means this capacity can be applied elsewhere. Say that developing the documentation took 1 week every time and we deliver 10 features every month. Then ... wow ... you get the idea.

Want to Know More?

- [How Do Small Changes Lead to Big Improvements?](#) for a discussion on the compounding effects that happen when you remove impediments.
- [How Do We Get Away from “Business as Usual” Thinking On Teams?](#) for a discussion around how to

help people really see problems in their system.

- [PopcornFlow: Continuous Evolution Through Ultra-Rapid Experimentation](#) for a more comprehensive set of Kanban states aimed at continuous improvement:
 - (P)roblem and observations
 - (O)ptions
 - (P)ossible experiments
 - (C)ommitted
 - (O)n-going
 - (R)evue
 - (N)ext

[FAQ](#), [Impediment](#), [Removal](#), [Organization](#), [SubjectSpecificArticle](#)

From:
<https://www.hanssamios.com/dokuwiki/> - **Hans Samios' Personal Lean-Agile Knowledge Base**

Permanent link:
https://www.hanssamios.com/dokuwiki/how_do_we_setup_an_organizational_impediment_removal_system_ssa

Last update: **2023/03/10 07:02**

