

## Must I Do This Now? In an Agile context

Over the years, I have worked with many teams within organizations moving from left to right in constant change. People from all places are targeting Engineers and other team members with ad-hoc questions or small assignments. Of course, in Agile environments Product Owners and Scrum Masters should be there to shield part or most of these interruptions. Yet, that is not always possible. The result is people who get distracted and are not confident about priorities. This is only a 'big' problem when there is more work to do than is possible timewise. So that is pretty much anywhere. Hence, we have to prioritize to keep ourselves and our teams focused. The mnemonic 'Must I do this now' can help you redefine your priorities.

### *Must I do this now?*

There is a lot of power stored in this little sentence constructed out of 5 words. Let's play a game and change the emphasis 5 times in a scenario where someone asks you to do something right now. See what happens to the meaning of the question and how it can help you redefine your priorities. In each case I'll reflect on the way the question should be answered in an Agile context.

#### 1. **[MUST]** I do this now?

Is the chore or question really necessary? People working in projects are used to MoSCoW [1]. I reuse that idea: if it is not a Must you probably should not do it. Often you immediately know if something is that important or just a nice thing to have.

In Agile: In using Scrum or Kanban, you can check the current Sprint Backlog or Work in Progress and verify that nothing in there is less important than the new chore at hand. In case you are doubting, the Product Owner should be there to help you decide. Do not hesitate to ask for clarity or advice.

#### 2. Must **[I]** do this now?

During your day you might receive a lot of questions. For some people asking something is even second nature to them. Often easier than thinking or solving a problem by themselves. Well, your time is valuable as well. The next step is to rethink if you are indeed the best person - or the only person - that is capable of handling this request. Perhaps the requester or another colleague is equally equipped.

In Agile: Teams should be able to handle all the tasks and preferably all skills are shared and well distributed among the team members. At least there should be someone else - besides you - capable of responding to the request. If someone else is looking to pick up something new and he or she is capable you don't need to interrupt your current task. This will help you to stay more focused.

### 3. Must I **[DO]** this now?

Before rushing into solving mode or chasing a problem, check out what the best modus operandi would be. What would solve the request? Sometimes no action is required at all. If the answer is the latter, there is no need to use the other questions. It is for this reason that this question is sometimes promoted to the top. In this blog, I stick to the order of the words for simplicity.

In Agile: In Scrum all user stories that are part of a Sprint must be ready and crystal clear. That means that the outcome itself and the way to achieve the outcome are also clear. If the “Do” part of a chore is not clear than the first step would be to get that clarified by the Product Owner or other stakeholders before adding it to sprint. Scrum Masters should learn teams to make stories as clear as possible and should check the clarity of the “Do” part regularly during refinements or planning sessions.

### 4. Must I do **[THIS]** now?

Then there is the actual “this”. Is the “this” the most appropriate and feasible action? Do you know what is driving the enquirer? The key element is not to rush into action mode just because someone has come up with an idea.

In Agile: Scrum and Kanban both push teams to get these aspects out of the way before they start working on something. Refinement sessions are used to clarify all stories and make sure we can actually do all the “thisses”. These tactics can also be used for random questions that come up during a sprint. Bottom line: If they are not clear, just don’t start working on them right away.

### 5. Must I do this **[NOW]**?

Last but not least is the “now” part. Now implies urgency. The urgency, however, is perceived by whoever raised the question. Often an action can wait, maybe for you to finish what you are working on, or maybe even longer like a week or more.

In Agile: Again, the Product Owner is the first go-to person to support you in assessing the urgency of the new request. If the assessment is made that the urgency can wait for a week, most times it can be planned and picked up in the next sprint. When organizations are in the midst of the transition to an Agile mindset you often see this ad-hoc pattern recurring. Team members receive requests directly from various stakeholders within the company and not via the Product Owner and Backlog. This indicates that more energy has to be put in the organization of these request flows to fully support the sprint rhythm.

## Agile & Common sense

Of course common sense should always prevail and will hopefully be your first advisor. When an important production system is down, there is no time to waste. DevOps Teams often use practices like reserving time for production support or unexpected work to protect their Sprint

Goals. A relevant quote from the Scrum guide in the Sprint section: “No changes are made that would endanger the Sprint Goal.” [2]. That is a firm statement. Yet, it also provides guidance to teams to judge whether there is room left in the sprint to help others or to stay focused to the current goal. So, for me these 5 words help me in the coaching of Agile teams to get their priorities straight out in no time. As mentioned in the intro, this approach is not only applicable to Agile teams but useful for everyone with more to do than time available. For another approach you could explore the usage of the Eisenhower Decision Matrix [3].

### Side note

Firstly, I don't take credits for the mnemonic as I did not invent it. A former colleague showed it to me a few years ago. I was not able to find its original roots [4][5]. Secondly, the sentence is a translation from the Dutch “Moet ik dit nu doen?”, which means literally the same – word by word – only in a different order. Since it is an external obligation in the question, the usage of “to have to” instead of “must” would improve the sentence's grammar [6]. I guess the meaning as-is is still solid enough and in this way the original esthetics of the sentence remain intact, instead of “Do I have to do this now?”.

### References

- [1] MoSCoW method: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MoSCoW\\_method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MoSCoW_method)
- [2] Sprint Goal: [www.scrumguides.org/scrum-guide.html](http://www.scrumguides.org/scrum-guide.html)
- [3] Eisenhower Decision Matrix: [www.artofmanliness.com/2013/10/23/eisenhower-decision-matrix](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/10/23/eisenhower-decision-matrix)
- [4] Origin I Moet ik dit nu doen: [lifehacking.nl/persoonlijk-tips/moet-ik-dit-nu-doen](http://lifehacking.nl/persoonlijk-tips/moet-ik-dit-nu-doen) (Dutch)
- [5] Origin II Moet ik dit nu doen: [www.carrieretijger.nl/prioriteiten-stellen](http://www.carrieretijger.nl/prioriteiten-stellen) (Dutch)
- [6] Grammar Must - to have to: [www.englishgrammarsecrets.com/musthaveto](http://www.englishgrammarsecrets.com/musthaveto)