Scrum Master vs Product Owner: who is accountable for what

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The 2020 Scrum Guide gives a Scrum Team three accountabilities: Developers, a Product Owner and a Scrum Master. The Product Owner is accountable for maximising the value of the product. The Scrum Master is accountable for the team's effectiveness. Put simply, the Product Owner decides what and why; the Scrum Master helps the team get better at how.

TL;DR The short version

- The Product Owner is accountable for maximising the product's value; the Scrum Master for the team's effectiveness.
- The Product Owner sets the Product Goal and orders the backlog, while the Scrum Master coaches and removes impediments.
- Combining the roles is risky because one pushes for more value and the other protects sustainable work.

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The Product Owner

- Develops and communicates the Product Goal.
- Creates, orders and clearly communicates Product Backlog items.
- Is one person, not a committee, though they may delegate work and represent many stakeholders.
- Has the final say on backlog order. Anyone who wants to change it has to convince the Product Owner.

The Scrum Master

- Coaches the team in self-management and cross-functionality.
- Causes impediments to be removed.
- Ensures Scrum events take place and are positive, productive and kept within the timebox.
- Helps the Product Owner with effective backlog management techniques.

Who handles this?

- A stakeholder wants a feature added mid-Sprint: the Product Owner decides whether it is worth it and talks to the Developers; the Scrum Master makes sure the Sprint Goal is respected.
- The backlog is vague and the team cannot plan: the Product Owner owns the fix; the Scrum Master can coach refinement.
- The team keeps missing its Sprint Goal: the Scrum Master leads the inquiry, often in the Retrospective.

- Two teams depend on each other: both, together with the other team’s Product Owner and Scrum Master.

Why not combine them?

One role pushes for more value delivered; the other protects the team’s ability to work sustainably. Putting both in one person removes a useful check. The Guide does not forbid one person from being both, but most teams find it a poor trade.

Working well together

Agree a shared view of the next few Sprints, meet briefly every week, and back each other in public. Disagree in private.

> Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Schwaber, K. and Sutherland, J. (2020). The Scrum Guide. scrumguides.org.

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