

SAFe® Team Backlog Refinement

Facilitator's Guide

Purpose, Intent, and Outcomes

Purpose

Team Backlog Refinement serves to continuously prepare the Agile Team's backlog, ensuring upcoming stories and features are well-defined, sized, and prioritized for future Iterations.

Intent

The intent of Team Backlog Refinement is to ensure the Agile Team has a shared understanding of the upcoming work, identifies technical dependencies and risks, and maintains a continuous flow of ready-to-implement stories to achieve their PI Objectives.

Outcomes

A successful Team Backlog Refinement event delivers the following:

- Stories within the Team Backlog that are high priority are discussed, detailed, and have defined acceptance criteria.
- Large stories are split into smaller, manageable stories that fit within an Iteration.
- Stories are sized and adjusted to be in priority order based on recent learnings and value.
- Outdated or irrelevant stories are removed, and new stories (including Enablers) are discovered.

Agenda

Team Backlog Refinement is a continuous activity, not a single time-boxed event, although many teams conduct dedicated weekly sessions or requirements specification workshops. The duration is flexible, but the team should ensure they always have enough "ready" work.

Step	Time	Description
Align on Priorities	Flexible	Remind the team of the ART vision and PI Objectives to guide refinement.

Step	Time	Description
Define the Stories	Flexible	Discuss each item to establish acceptable solutions and capture acceptance criteria. This includes collaborating with stakeholders and applying techniques like Behavior-Driven Development (BDD).
Initial Sizing & Splitting of Stories	Flexible	Break down large stories so they fit easily within an iteration timebox. The team should provide initial size estimates.
Collaborative Prioritization	Flexible	Adjust the backlog sequence based on value (Product Owner and stakeholders) and technical sequencing (Agile Team).

Preparation Checklist

Before the refinement activities, prepare the following:

Attendees, Location, and Inputs

- Ensure the Product Owner, Scrum Master/Team Coach, and the Agile Team are present. Invite relevant stakeholders or Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) as needed.
- Find a physical or virtual space that supports collaborative discussion and visualization of the backlog.
- **Gather Initial Stories (Inputs):** Ensure the team has placeholder stories (shell stories) created during PI Planning or emerging from Iteration Reviews/System Demos/Retrospectives to begin refinement.
- **Understand ART Context and Priorities:** Have the ART Vision, PI Objectives, and ART Planning Board visible or readily accessible to help guide story prioritization.
- Ensure the team's work is visible, typically on the work management tool or SAFe Team Kanban board.

Tips and Tricks

Remote Facilitation

If you're having an event online, remember these tips:

- Use a shared digital board or work management tool so the backlog and stories being refined are visible to everyone.

- Share your screen with the ART PI Objectives displayed to keep the refinement focused on the overall goals.
- Encourage the use of visual collaboration tools (e.g., digital sticky notes) for capturing acceptance criteria and discussion points.

Overcoming Challenges

Potential Issue	Way to Overcome
The team attempts to define every story, no matter how far down the backlog it is.	Coach the team to refine only the highest-priority stories, ensuring enough are "ready" for the next Iteration Planning, but not over-refining items far down the backlog. Apply the principle of <i>just-in-time</i> refinement.
Stories are consistently too large to fit in an iteration.	Prompt the team to use story splitting techniques. Ask clarifying questions to find the minimum marketable feature or slice of value. Emphasize that stories must fit within the Iteration timebox.
Discussions turn into problem-solving or design sessions.	Gently interrupt and refocus the discussion on defining <i>what</i> the solution must do (acceptance criteria) rather than <i>how</i> it will be built (design). Use the "meet-after" approach for detailed technical spikes or design discussions.
The Product Owner dominates the discussion, or the team is passive.	Remind the team that refinement is a collaborative process. Use techniques like "fist of five" for sizing or asking for input specifically from quieter team members to ensure the team owns the backlog details.
The team is not considering technical dependencies or Enablers.	Prompt the team with questions like: "What technical work is required to support this new feature?" or "Who do we need to coordinate with on another team?" to surface necessary Enabler stories or dependencies.

Post-Event Actions

Since Backlog Refinement is continuous, "post-event" actions occur regularly:

- The Product Owner updates the backlog sequence based on the collaborative prioritization and recent learnings.
- The Scrum Master/Team Coach ensures dependencies surfaced during refinement are communicated to the relevant Agile Teams or coordinated in the Coach Sync.
- Update the work management tool or shared Team Kanban board to reflect the ready stories, updated acceptance criteria, and new estimates.