

5 warning signs that something is off

Recognize the signs before delay becomes unavoidable
— with a focus on the human factor.

BEFORE YOU START

Introduction

Who is it for?

For new and not-so-new Product Owners who feel that something is off in delivery — or want to spot the signs before they become real problems.

How does it help?

The human factor plays a huge role in delivery quality. If something is off, the product will feel it too. Do not wait until there is trouble — watch the signs.

Who am I?

For the past 8 years I have worked in a large banking environment: I started as a tester, then moved into Product Owner work, and later Business Analysis also became part of my role. I have worked in agile, waterfall and hybrid environments. Agile methods and people management are close to my heart.

This guide helps you **recognize these signs** and understand the problems **behind them** so you can address them.

Contents

- 01** There is too much silence in refinement

- 02** Everything is “fine” at standup — but nothing moves

- 03** The sprint is almost over, but no one knows why stories are stuck

- 04** Too many bugs

- 05** Too many stories carry over to the next sprint

- What can you do as a PO? · Toolkit

01

SPRINT WARNING SIGN

There is too much silence in refinement

The purpose of grooming — or backlog refinement — is for the team to understand the upcoming work together before it enters the sprint. The Product Owner presents the stories, developers ask questions, share opinions and suggest solutions. If everything is clear, estimation follows: developers estimate the stories. These points become the basis for sprint planning.

That is exactly why this event is so valuable — and exactly why silence is suspicious.

Three signs that should warn you



Complete silence, zero questions

If the team consistently stays silent, it may mean they do not understand the task, or they do not feel safe enough to ask questions.



Uncertain estimation without questions

If someone estimates without asking what they did not understand, the estimate will almost certainly be inaccurate.



Extreme estimates

If one person gives a story 2 points and another gives it 13, people imagined different things.

What might be behind it?

Silence is rarely laziness. Much more often it is **lack of trust**. If the team is afraid of looking stupid, estimating “wrongly”, or feeling that their question is unnecessary — they stay silent. This develops slowly and quietly poisons the team’s way of working.

⚠ In online meetings it is much easier to “be present” without actually participating. Actively ask for feedback.

Why does this hurt you as a PO?

Inaccurate estimation → inaccurate planning → slipping sprint → broken promises to stakeholders. The quality of refinement directly affects delivery value.

What can you do?

Do not wait for the retro. You can ask questions during refinement too — and if you admit that you did not know something, the team is more likely to open up. **You can help create a safe atmosphere.**

02

SPRINT WARNING SIGN

Everything is “fine” at standup — but nothing moves

The purpose of the daily standup is simple: in a few minutes, review who made progress, what they plan for today, and whether there is a blocker to solve. It is not a status report — it is daily synchronization. When it works well, it brings problems forward before they become blockers.

But what if everyone says everything is fine — and the sprint still does not move?

What is suspicious

- 1 **Vague updates without a concrete issue.** Someone says they are working on it, but names neither a result nor a blocker. If no concrete problem is named, it cannot be solved.
- 2 **Lack of motivation.** Someone who is not engaged with the task is unlikely to volunteer that they are stuck. They may struggle silently — or not struggle at all, just wait.
- 3 **Poorly estimated story.** If a task turns out larger than planned, but no one dares to say it, the standup can sound fine — while the story is stuck.

Why does this hurt you as a PO?

Because delays build up slowly and invisibly. A few “everything is fine” days become the sprint end where it turns out that the story has not really moved. **You will explain it to stakeholders — not the team.**

What can you do as a PO?

Join standups if the team allows it — after all, it is your product. If the team does not need you there, ask the Scrum Master for a daily ten-minute update, or at least a short email. **This is not control — it is awareness.**

03

SPRINT WARNING SIGN

The sprint is almost over, but no one knows why the stories are stuck

If you noticed the previous two signs and could not intervene in time, this is the point where there is no longer time to search for root causes. **The question is no longer why, but what can be done now.**

What you need to do toward the project

Go to the stakeholders and honestly explain the situation: what will be delivered, when, and what is blocking progress.

- **Resource shortage**— more people, overtime or access is needed
- **External dependency**— another system is not yet available
- **More complex solution**— it turned out more complicated than expected

⚠ A surprise is always worse than an early warning — even if the news is not good.

The team is a closed unit

If human factors are behind the delay — motivation, communication, internal conflict — those do not go public.

Stakeholders do not need to know who did what. What they need to know is: **what the situation is, what the plan is, and when it will be resolved.**

If there is a real blocker — an external dependency or missing resource — communicate it as soon as possible. The earlier it is on the table, the more chance there is to solve it.

04

SPRINT WARNING SIGN

Too many bugs

One or two bugs during a sprint are normal. But if many unexpected defects appear regularly, that is a signal — something deserves a closer look.

Where can a bug come from?



Externally sourced bug

The error is not in our own development, but in an external system. For example, an expired certificate or a changed API call that was not communicated. Go to the source: is it a temporary or permanent dependency?



Internally sourced bug

The error was created within the team. It may be inattention, an oversized task, or a personal reason. Sabotage is theoretically possible, but extremely rare — do not start from that assumption.

Small bug or serious problem?



Fixable within the sprint

Small issues that can even be fixed without creating a separate ticket. Identify and prioritize them.



To be planned into the next sprint

Larger defects that need to be planned. Identifying and prioritizing them is a PO task.

What can you do if the cause is human?

Reach out to the developer and ask them to explain the situation. Personal difficulty? Task too large? Do they need help?

The goal is not accountability theater, but finding what helps them work well again. Task swap, mentor, or just an honest conversation.

05

SPRINT WARNING SIGN

Many stories carry over to the next sprint

If many stories are not completed by the end of the sprint, it is rarely a surprise — it is usually the consequence of one of the previous four signs. Silence in refinement, stuck stories, unreported issues and bugs all lead here. **This is the point where everything becomes visible.**

What does this mean as a PO?



Business consequence

What you promised stakeholders did not happen. The roadmap slips. And you will be the one explaining it.



Act early

Do not wait until sprint review. Go to the business early: give an accurate picture of what is done, what is not, and when it can be expected.

What does it mean for the next sprint?

Carried-over stories automatically load the next sprint — there is less room for new work, and team motivation may drop.

It is worth checking the cause: was the sprint overcommitted? Was the estimate wrong? Was there an external dependency? All of this is feedback for the next planning.

⚠ A retrospective is useful only if it is honest. If the same signs repeat sprint after sprint, the retro is not enough. You need to dig deeper.



SUMMARY

What can you do as a PO? — *The key point*

The five signs in this guide all point back to the same thing: something was not said in time. The solution almost always starts in the same place — in a safe, supportive environment where these things can be said.

The team is one unit

They do it together, are responsible together, and share the consequences together. They do not all have to love each other — but if someone gets stuck, the others help. Because they are in the same boat.

External or internal obstacle?

Always ask this first. If it is external — investigate, clarify and solve. If it is internal — talk it through and understand what the colleague needs. The colleague is a person — that is the first consideration.

What you should never do

Never expose a colleague or make them a scapegoat. What happens inside the team stays there. Problems are solved inwardly, not displayed outwardly.

Let go of their hands

Micromanagement kills ownership. If you trust someone and express that trust — they will want to live up to it. It is worth trying.

"These signs do not mean your team is bad. They mean something needs attention. The best POs are not the ones who solve every problem — but the ones who notice early and know how to ask the right questions."



STRUCTURED SOLUTIONS

Toolkit as a PO

In the previous chapters, we often referred to “talking things through.” That is true — but a good PO does not only react instinctively; they can also work within structured frameworks.



Retrospective

The dedicated event at the end of a sprint — not for blaming people, but for learning. What went well? What needs to change? It is only useful if it is honest and something actually changes in the next sprint.



Psychological safety

Amy Edmondson's concept: the team dares to ask, make mistakes and speak up without fear of punishment. You shape it too — through how you react. If you admit that you did not know something, the team learns that it is safe to say what they think.



1:1 meetings

20–30 minutes one-on-one every two weeks. Not status, not accountability — just space to share what is blocking progress. It gives structure to an informal coffee conversation.



Definition of Done

Defined together and written down: when is a story “done”? If this is not defined, everyone understands it differently — causing bugs, misunderstandings and delays.



Working agreement

The team defines together how they work: when they are available to each other, how they signal blockers, and what counts as a blocker. What people create together, they are more likely to follow.

If you have a question or would like to hear more about a specific topic, contact me through dornyeikatalin.hu I am happy to help.