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Liftoff, Second Edition

Start and Sustain Successful Agile Teams

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The
Pragmatic
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Liftoff

Second
Edition

Start and Sustain
Successful Agile Teams



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Liftoff, Second Edition

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Introduction: Defying Gravity

For ages, humans have watched birds soaring and have wanted to fly. We stayed earthbound until we learned about the effects of gravity and how to overcome them. Now we can defy gravity with a rocket launch, or *liftoff*. Rockets generate energy at the start of flight, giving humans the force to overcome gravitational pull and boost themselves skyward.

At the beginning of a team-based effort, often there's a void, an inertia. Teams need an initial boost—a liftoff—to generate a force that overrides the inertia resulting from a lack of common purpose, unclear communication channels, undefined working relationships, and other areas of ambiguity.

To add to the confusion, every project has many parts: a visionary with a Big Idea; people who are directly and indirectly involved in the work; a particular physical space and psychological climate; process tools and techniques; and more. The first time all of these parts come together sets the tone for the work and lays the foundation for everything to come later.

What Is a Liftoff?

Maybe it *is* rocket science! A liftoff creates the positive force that moves a team toward successful delivery, time after time. It's the time when everyone associated with the product vision comes together. They collaborate to define the initial intentions, approach, and plans. They begin team building. The sponsor supports the time to build and aligns understanding among all parties involved.

While we use the term *liftoff*, your organization might prefer other names for this event. You may have heard it called a kickoff, boot camp, project launch, and so on. We like the motion and momentum implied by *liftoff*.

An effective liftoff achieves alignment—a shared understanding about the work and why it exists. It brings key stakeholders and core team members together. It clarifies roles by developing working relationships among stakeholders, product development, core team members, and business sponsors.

It outlines the context for the work and why it matters to the organization as a whole. An effective liftoff positions your team on the trajectory to success.

Why We Wrote This Book

As agile coaches and consultants, we've led hundreds of retrospectives, and we've noticed a pattern. When teams don't have clarity and alignment at the start of working together on a new deliverable, challenges appear later. Miscommunication, unexamined assumptions, and misperceptions cause teams to make poor decisions. Team members take actions that unintentionally work at cross-purposes and undermine progress. Such dynamics prevent people from seeing the whole system and can cause rifts, resentment, and distrust among stakeholders. Taken together, these dynamics breed failure.

While how you start isn't the whole answer for a successful end, we've never experienced a work effort that started in disarray that was able to end well—at least not without a reset to clarify the core intention. Have you? To achieve their mission, those teams still had to *start*, even if they skipped this step at the beginning.

We wrote this book to build a wider awareness of the many ways to launch agile teams toward success. We want to show you how to launch a team with *attention* and *intention*, and that when sponsors and managers take the time to focus on a liftoff, they see an accelerated leap into the work. In short, we want to help you give your agile work effort a great beginning.

What's Inside?

You'll explore ways to organize and conduct liftoff meetings. You'll learn to appreciate the vital step of agile chartering for teams. You'll find real-life In Practice stories of how others have helped teams start (or restart). You'll discover a variety of team activities to fuel your liftoff. You'll see how to lead liftoffs step by step. You can imagine the payoff you can gain from intentional team liftoff activities. You can adopt a framework for effective, *just-enough* agile team chartering.

We organized the book so that you can choose an approach to reading it that fits best for you. If you read it cover to cover, you'll find a thorough exploration of why liftoffs matter and read stories that show how liftoff activities have fared in practice. You'll learn how to lead a liftoff, and you'll discover how agile chartering fits into starting teams well.

The book also has its own page on The Pragmatic Programmers website,¹ where you can find an interactive discussion forum as well as a place to submit errata.

Who'll Benefit from Reading This Book?

This book is written for anyone who has a stake in product development, delivery, and deployment. Based on the reception of the first incarnation of this book, *Liftoff: Launching Agile Teams and Projects* (published by Onyx Neon in 2011), if you are an agile coach, Scrum master for multiple teams, agile project manager, or other person who facilitates teamwork and meetings, this book is clearly for you.

However, happy readers also include executives, executive sponsors, CIOs, CTOs, product development managers, product and traditional project managers, product owners, engineering leads, development team members, business analysts, QA managers, QA leads, test leads, and more.

Whatever your role, we've written this book for you—if you want to lead or belong to a successful team.

Let's get started!

Diana Larsen and Ainsley Nies

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1. www.pragprog.com/book/liftoff