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# AGILE BULLETIN

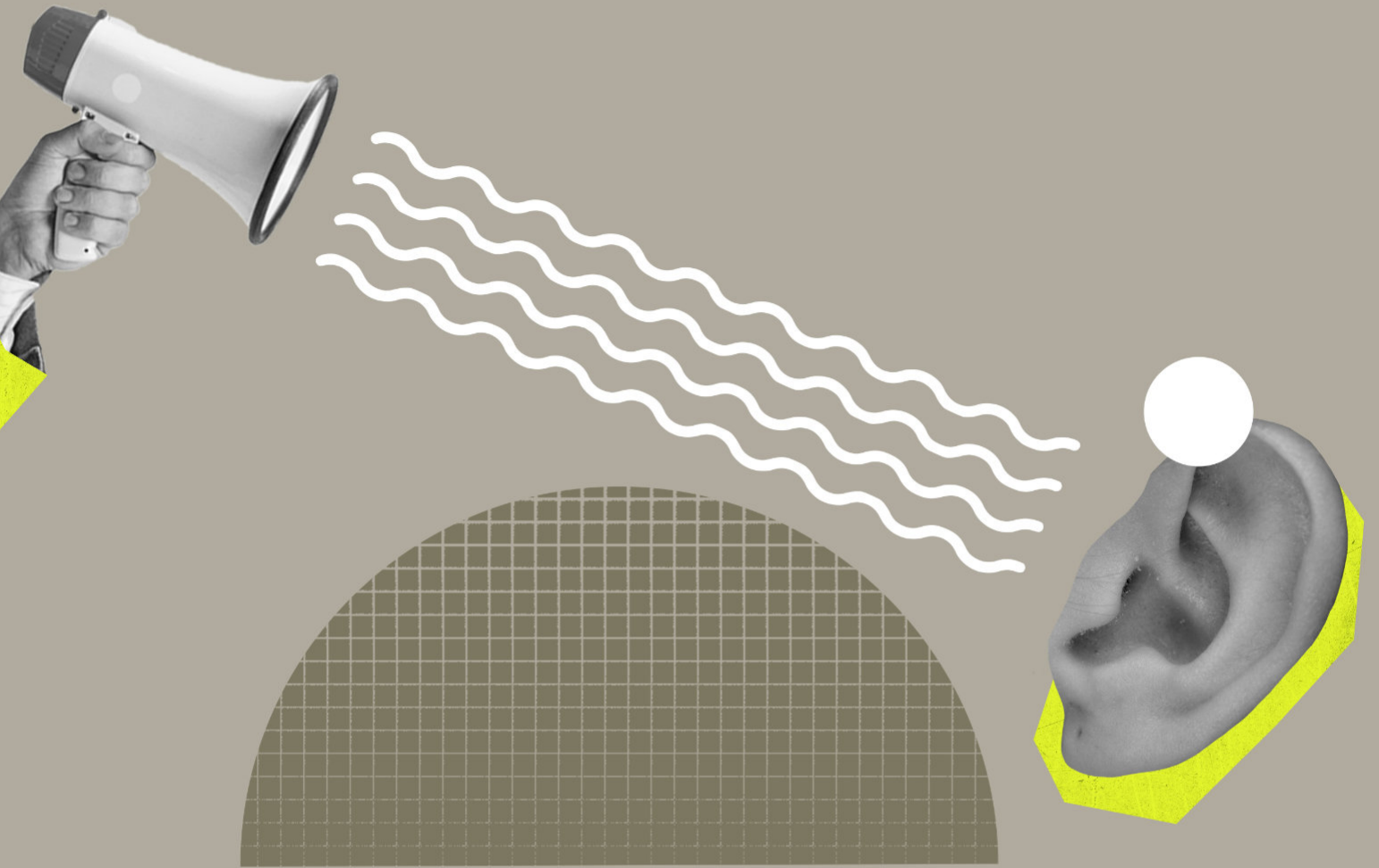
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## UNPLANNED WORK — FRIEND OR FOE?



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“**R**esponding to change over following a plan” is one of the four values in the Agile Manifesto - the document that sets forth the guiding principles for Agility. The core premise of Agile is to become adaptive and responsive amidst uncertainty. Yet ever since Gene Kim published “*The Phoenix Project*”, the Agile-DevOps Community has been chanting the mantra “minimize unplanned work”.

Why are we deeply committed to being “adaptable and responsive” yet exasperated when faced with unplanned work?

I started to wonder, “What’s the difference between fire drills and adaptability?” and “How might we manage unplanned work better without losing valuable opportunities?”.

# Why do people hate fire drills?

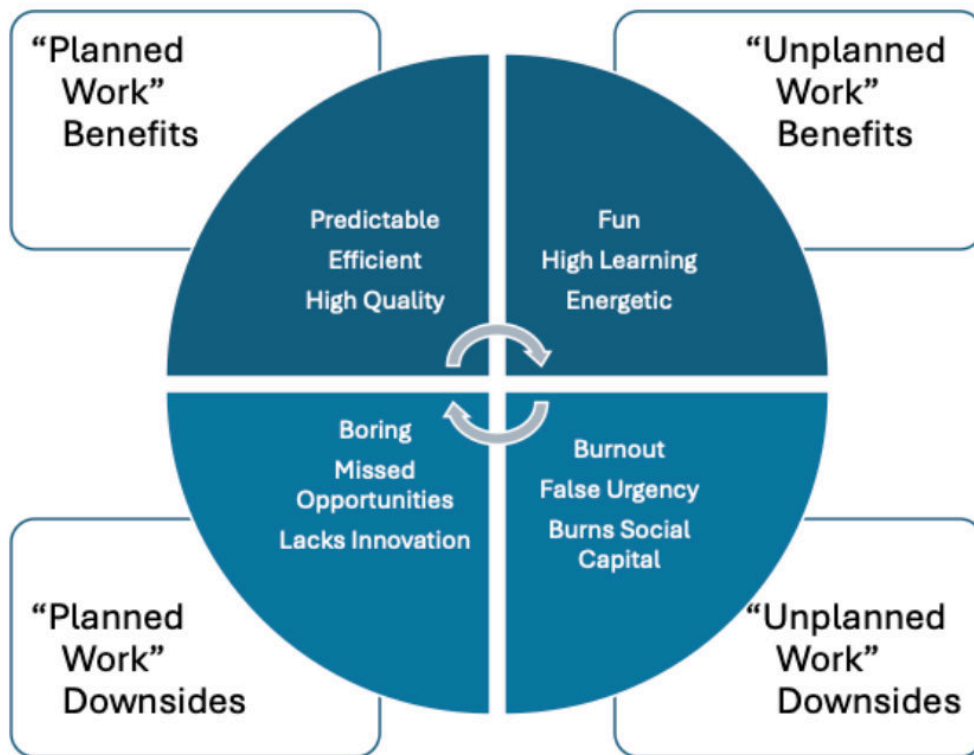
Fire drills are one of the top soul-crushing experiences at work. I recently worked with a client whose employee engagement survey showed they were unhappy about fire drills. The leadership hypothesis was, “They don’t like change, but the team needs to accept that fire drills are the nature of our business and deal with it”. I had the privilege of unpacking this with the team. I was eager to shake out exactly what it was about unplanned work that they didn’t like.

I met with the team and had them map out four quadrants: The upside & downside of

reason and wasting social capital they could use for more important work. The thing that was crushing their souls was urgent, unplanned work that they busted their ass and missed their kid’s soccer game to do when they didn’t need to. We’ll call work that didn’t need to happen or didn’t need to be urgent “**stupid work**”.

Once the team sorted this out, they implemented a process to better manage unplanned work. I’ll explain that in a moment.

## The Difference between Planned and Unplanned is Time Horizon



both planned and unplanned work. Here’s what they found:

They thought unplanned work was “fun”! They didn’t like being burned out for no

When I talk to Agile teams about unplanned work, they say, “Anything that isn’t planned for the 2-week sprint is unplanned, and we just say ‘no!’”. Interesting, because I hate to



quote Agile Scripture, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle of the Agile Manifesto says, “Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer’s competitive advantage”. I couldn’t find the part in the Agile Manifesto that says, “We welcome change as long as it’s more than two weeks in advance”.

We consider work “unplanned” because it’s outside our planning time horizon. It’s not the work that’s unplanned; it’s that the planning cycle is too long for that particular work.

## Unplanned Work delays Planned Work

Another problem with unplanned work is that it impacts the delivery of planned work, creating a whole host of problems with flow. Unplanned work also adds to the work in progress, which increases overhead and holding cost.

Constantly dropping one thing for another leaves a trail of unfinished work, with little value delivered to the business and its customers.

## Can we be Adaptive and Responsive without Unplanned Work?

In the story above, the leader’s response was, “Deal with it; this is how we have to work to be competitive”. In fact, with this group, opportunities had popped up, with a small market window that was legitimately worth dropping everything for. But not all of them.

Some teams allocate a percentage of time to “unplanned work”, which is okay as a temporary measure so you can see what’s happening. However, it’s not optimal because it still allows capacity for “stupid work”, and limits the capacity for unplanned work that can truly make a difference.

We needed to find a way to jump on genuine opportunities without turning everything into an emergency.

# Getting Started: Managing Planned and Unplanned Work

The bottom line is that if we want to be adaptive and responsive, we need to normalize unplanned work in a way that is good for business and doesn't crush people's souls. Here are a few ways to get started.

**1. Get Unplanned Work into the Process.** Unplanned work tends to live outside the normal process, which feels chaotic and lacks transparency. Consider a lightweight triage intake process to corral the work that comes off-cycle. Although the timing is ad-hoc, the format can be known. What do we need to answer when unplanned work comes in? Here are some suggestions:

- What is the benefit of pivoting to this work?
- Where does this fall in priority compared to the work we are currently doing? What can we deprioritize?
- What additional information do we need to move forward?

**2. Minimize stupid work.** The original adage to 'minimize unplanned work' is still true. Just be more specific about what type of unplanned work you're minimizing—the stupid kind. Actually, go ahead and minimize all stupid work—planned and unplanned.

Stupid work includes work that didn't need to be last minute, work that didn't happen at all, work based on an executive's passing comment or whim, and internal work to make someone look good. It also includes work that's urgent because an executive will be leaving for vacation tomorrow.

To get started, simply track and tag stupid work. Once you can see it, you can decide how to minimize it.

**3. Communicate early and widely.** I saw a sign outside someone's office that said, "A lack of





planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part.” I have heard many leaders say, “We’re not ready to share this with the team yet; we don’t want to distract them.” But once they are ready, they want it yesterday and expect everyone to snap to it!

It is soul-crushing to keep people out of the loop until the work becomes their emergency. Being clear about priorities prevents people from getting distracted while you keep them in the loop.

## Try this:

- Distinguish between ‘stupid work’ and ‘emergent opportunities.’
- Draft a lightweight process for new work outside your planning cycle.
- Communicate early and widely.
- Avoid crushing people’s souls by understanding the effort and commitment needed for unplanned work. The game they miss maybe their kid’s best soccer game ever.

Jardena London is a consultant (the good kind), author, speaker and CEO of Rosetta Agile. She has spent the last 30 years finding ways to transform organizations so our souls can flourish, while our financials thrive.

Her book *Cultivating Transformations: A Leader’s Guide to Connecting the Soulful and Practical* supports this mission by drawing a straight line between the processes we use, the way we feel, and the results we get so that we nourish our souls while producing thriving financial outcomes.

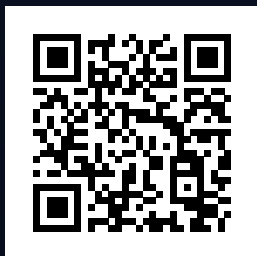
You can learn more about Jardena and explore her resources on leadership at [www.jardenalondon.com](http://www.jardenalondon.com) [www.rosettaagile.com](http://www.rosettaagile.com) [www.cultivating-transformations.com](http://www.cultivating-transformations.com)





This article is part of the Agile Bulletin 2024 series, a collaborative effort by 13 prominent authors. Their contributions have been instrumental in the success of this publication, which was presented at the Agile 2024 annual conference in Dallas, Texas.

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