

# It Takes A Village:

## Rock Crusher Roles

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“The hardest single part of building a software system is deciding precisely what to build. No other part of the conceptual work is as difficult as establishing the detailed technical requirements. No other part of the work so cripples the resulting system if done wrong.”

No Silver Bullet: Essence and Accidents of Software Engineering. Computer  
FP Brooks Jr - IEEE Computer Society, Washington, DC, 1987

## It Takes a Village

Many parents are familiar with the expression “it takes a village to raise a child,” which is a reference to all the support roles necessary to raise healthy happy children. This is a good metaphor for when it comes to deciding precisely what to build. Pushing agility beyond the team and acknowledging the value stream doesn’t begin and end with the Product Owner. It stretches the classic Product Owner role into its constituent roles. The village encompasses the roles of:

- Customer;
- Stakeholder;
- Initiative Owner;
- Subject Matter Expert (SME);
- Analyst;
- Solution Owner; and
- The Backlog Owner.

Sometimes these roles can be played by a few, or an individual – the classical Product Owner, but in a complex environments, or at scale, multiple people are required to play these roles.

## Rock Crusher Roles

These are roles, and not specific individual job descriptions. Individuals may play multiple roles. For example, it wouldn’t be unusual for the Backlog Owner to also be a Subject Matter Expert and an Analyst. Some of these roles could also be played by multiple individuals. For example, a larger Initiative may require multiple individuals playing the role of Analyst. How many individuals are involved deciding precisely what to build depends on many factors:

- Size and complexity of the solution;
- Size of team; and
- Nature of the market (e.g., mass market or contract), etc.

The team plays an important role in “... deciding precisely what to build ...” because deciding what to build is a collaboration between the team and all the other roles. While roles such as Solution Owner, Initiative Owner, and Backlog Owner are accountable for deciding precisely what to build, they aren’t dictatorial roles, and they are not gate keeper roles. Team members are responsible for collaborating with all roles to decide precisely what to build, and they are accountable for delivering on their commitments to the Backlog Owner.



**Customer**

- The receiver or beneficiary of the solution.
- May need to be informed about decision as to precisely what to build.



**Stakeholder**

- Any individual who, at a minimum, must be consulted about precisely what is being built, and may also have decision making authority in deciding “precisely what to build.”
- A Customer may also be a Stakeholder if they need to be consulted about decisions on precisely what to build.



**Initiative Owner**

- Accountable for getting an Initiative done.
- Many different teams and individuals may have to collaborate to get the Initiative done, and, therefore, it is easy for an Initiative to “get lost in the process.”



**Subject Matter Expert (SME)**

- Someone who has deep knowledge of the relevant problem domain and/or relevant technology and development practices.
- SMEs use their knowledge to advise other roles “deciding precisely what to build.”
- They are responsible for providing the expertise other roles may need to perform their jobs.



**Analyst**

- Responsible for transforming the sometimes competing wants, hopes, interests and aspirations of the Customer, Stakeholder, Initiative Owner, Product Manager, and the contributions of the SME, into a shared, clear understanding of precisely what to build.
- Responsible for progressively creating a better understanding of precisely what to build – the solution.



**Solution Manager**

- A customer facing role accountable for which features make into a solution but doesn’t have final say on prioritization of work for an individual team.
- A Solution Manager is different from an Initiative Owner because the Solution Manager role is linked to the long-term evolution of the solution.



**Backlog Owner**

- Has the final say on the sequencing /prioritizing of work for a team.
- The Backlog Owner has the final say because they are accountable for ensuring the team is always working on the most valuable work.



## Patterns of Collaborations

### All-in-One – Single Individual Playing All Roles (Classical Product Owner)

This is the classic Agile methodology backlog ownership model. An omniscient and omnipotent individual, representing the business, collaborates with the team. They:

- Set product direction;
- Clarify and prioritize the backlog;
- Create some of the backlog items (e.g., writing some user stories); and
- Accept the work products created by the team.

Researchers and practitioners have expressed their reservations about the practicality of this model, but there are situations where it may be sustainable. The sole Product Owner model is simple. If achievable, this model offers the best decision-making speed, and minimizes potential confusion over accountability. Don't pretend this is your model when, in reality, it isn't.



Classic Product Owner - Single Individual Plays All Roles

### Solution Owner and Backlog Owner

A major challenge with the classic Product Owner model is the expectation that the individual playing this role is fully connected to the market and fully dedicated to working with the team. In most organizations this is not a reasonable expectation, and this collaboration pattern off-loads the product management responsibilities from the classic Product Owner model. This collaboration acknowledges that, in most situations, it is impossible for a single individual to effectively fulfill the demands of the classic Product Owner role. With the classical Product Owner, either product management or backlog management will suffer. In some organizations the Product Manager may fulfill the Rock Crusher role of Solution Owner.



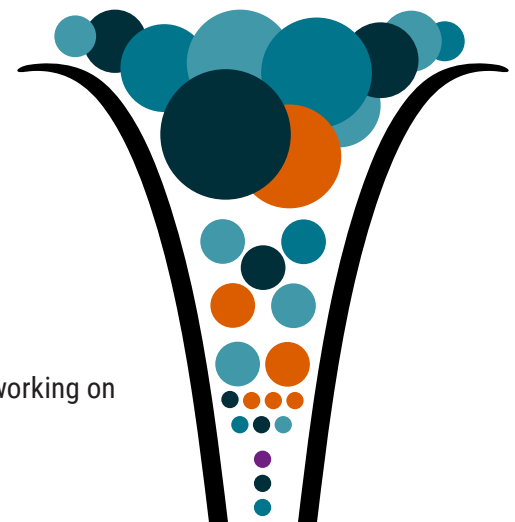
#### Solution Owner

- More "outward customer facing"
- Interests is determining best value features in product
- Longer time spans



#### Backlog Owner

- More inward, technical facing
- Interests are tactical, team is working on highest value work
- Ensures team is not starved
- Accepts team's work



Different Individuals Play the Solution/Product Management and Backlog Management Roles

In this model, the responsibility for “... determining precisely what to build” is a collaboration between a Solution Owner who maintains a big product picture and drives the solution roadmap, and the Backlog Owner who works closely with their team to create “Ready” Rocks. The individual playing the role of the Backlog Owner may also be an Analyst, helping crush Rocks for the team. This is a good model for situations where the ideal candidate for Backlog Owner is from the business and has a day job.



**Analyst**



**Solution Owner**



**Backlog Owner**



Analyst may Assist the Solution Owner and Backlog Owner

This model can fail if there is confusion surrounding accountability and decision-making authority between the Solution Owner and Backlog Owner. While the Solution Owner is accountable for the solution, the Backlog Owner is accountable for prioritizing and creating Ready Rocks in the backlog. There is potential for conflict if the interests of the Solution Owner and Backlog Owner aren’t aligned. Solution Owners may be tempted to bypass the Backlog Owner, or the Backlog Owner may ignore the wishes of the Solution Owner.

One or more Analysts may help the Solution Owner and the Backlog Owner. An Analyst may work with the Product Owner to “crush” product features for a roadmap. An Analysts may work with the Backlog Owner to crush roadmap features into Ready Rocks which can be pulled by the team.

## Initiative Owner and Backlog Owner

This collaboration:

- Recognizes that many Product Owners are only interested in shepherding an Initiative (or project) they are accountable for through the development process. The team is then left on its own to prioritize and understand the other work in their backlog. This issue is mitigated if the roles are implemented by different individuals.

- The Initiative Owner negotiates with the Backlog Owner to get the work for their Initiative prioritized in the backlog. The Initiative Owner is accountable for getting their Initiative done. They will collaborate with the Backlog Owner to prioritize the work, and with the team to help them understand the work. In a traditional world, the Initiative Owner is loosely analogous to a project manager.
- Works well when there are multiple Initiative Owners. The Backlog Owner becomes a moderator who facilitates the trade-offs of different prioritizations with the Initiative Owners.



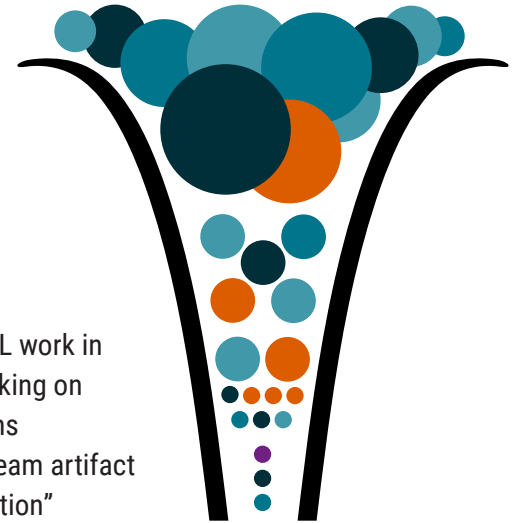
**Initiative Owner**

- Accountable for getting an Initiative done
- Shepherds in the Initiative through the value stream
- Initiative is considered to be a temporary undertaking (e.g., a project)



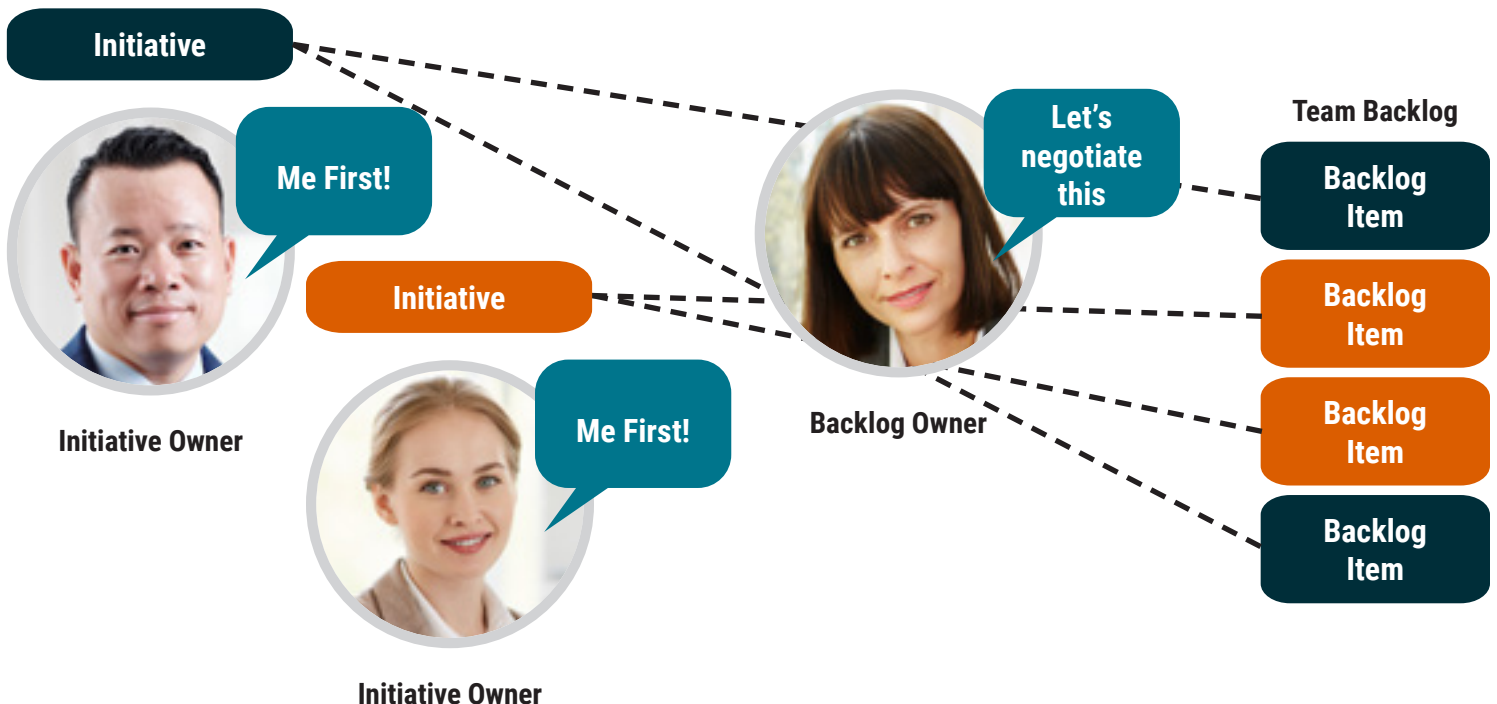
**Backlog Owner**

- Accountable for prioritizing ALL work in the backlog so the team is working on the most valuable backlog items
- Backlog is considered a long-team artifact existing for the life of the “solution”



Different Individual are Accountable for Shepherding Initiatives and Owning the Backlog

Like the Solution Owner, the Backlog Owner collaborates; this collaboration can become challenged if the Initiative Owner’s and Backlog Owner’s are not aligned.



Multiple Initiative Owners Negotiate with the Backlog Owner

## The Analyst as a Boundary Spanning and Connecting Role

An Analyst’s job is to drive understanding and alignment between all the different roles that have an interest in the solution. Customers, Stakeholders, Initiative Owners, Subject Matter Experts, Solution Owners and Backlog Owners potentially all have different views of the solution, use different terminology, and all need to collaborate to quickly decide on precisely what to build. The Analyst will create models to help facilitate understanding and collaboration to get the job done.

Most Agile methodologies don’t explicitly acknowledge the Analyst role and usually imply this function is a collaboration between the Product Owner and the team. However, the Analyst role emerged for a reason, and often there is a need for a designated individual. This doesn’t mean other individuals (e.g., the Backlog Owner, the team) can abdicate their role as analysts and simply wait to be “fed.”

There are three specific collaborations between the analyst and other Rock Crusher roles:



Analyst as a Boundary Spanning Role

<b>Initiative Owner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One or more Analysts may work with the Initiative Owner to crush the Initiative.</li> </ul>
<b>Solution Owner-Backlog Owner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One or more Analysts may work with the Solution Owner to crush Rocks for the solution.</li> <li>• The Analyst also “moderates” the relationship between the Solution Owner and Backlog Owner.</li> </ul>
<b>Backlog Owner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One or more Analyst may work with the Backlog Owner to help them Crush the work in the backlog.</li> <li>• When a specific individual plays this role, it is important that other team members do not abdicate responsibility for crushing work in the backlog.</li> </ul>



## Summary

	ACCOUNTABLE	RESPONSIBLE	CONSULTED	INFORMED
<b>Customer</b>				Customer may need to be informed of crusher related decisions.
<b>Stakeholder</b>		Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.	Consulted on crusher decisions affecting a product or initiative they have interest in.	Informed of the progress on the solution or an Initiative.
<b>Initiative Owner</b>	Accountable for delivering an Initiative.	Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.	Consulted on crushing decisions affecting the Initiative.	Informed of the progress of their Initiative.
<b>Subject Matter Expert</b>		Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.		
<b>Analysts</b>		Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.		
<b>Solution Manager</b>	Accountable for delivering a valuable product.	Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.	Needs to be consulting on crushing decisions affecting the product.	Informed of the progress of the Initiative.
<b>Backlog Owner</b>	Accountable for managing the team backlog to maximize the team's delivered value.	Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.		
<b>Team</b>	Accountable for delivering on their commitments to the Backlog Owner.	Responsible for collaborating with other roles and facilitating the crushing process for their backlog.		Needs to be informed of crushing decisions affecting their backlog.



## Learn More

### Rock Crusher for Backlog Management

#### Read:

1. Introduction
2. Ceremonies
3. Implementing
4. Roles
5. Crushes/Backlog Items

Considered Harmful  
Anti-Patterns  
Re-acquainting  
Work not Road Mapped

#### View:

Rock Crusher Infograph

User Story Infograph