How the Pontiac Aztek is a Cautionary Tale for Scrum Teams

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Sometimes, no matter how well intentioned, no matter how well designed and no matter how well orchestrated a product rollout is, it fails. In the case of Pontiac Aztek, everything seemed great, but it ended going down in history as one of the great automotive failures.

At the time, GM had a reputation for being sort of staid or of not taking chances, so a goal was set to make 40 percent of their new vehicles "innovative." What that meant was that vehicles wouldn't be dismissed for looking weird.

The Aztek was first introduced as a concept car in 1999. It was actually well received, but somewhere between concept and market, it became the joke of the automotive market.

The Aztek should never have gotten off the ground. It scored dead last in market research. People hated it, but GM didn't listen. The team involved in developing and bringing the Aztek to market were uncomfortable giving any sort of negative feedback. Bob Lutz, who was GM's vice chairman of product development at the time, wrote about the debacle in Road and Track.

"The guy in charge of product development was Don Hackworth, an old-school guy from the tradition of shouts, browbeating, and by-God-I-want-it-done. He said, "Look. We've all made up our minds that the Aztek is gonna be a winner. It's gonna astound the world. I don't want any negative comments about this vehicle. None. Anybody who has bad opinions about it, I want them off the team." As if the

public is gonna give a sh** about team spirit. Obviously, the industry is trying to get away from that approach.

The danger with the totalitarian management style is that people won't speak up when there's a problem. They'll get their heads cut off or the messenger gets shot."

The Aztek was marketed from 2001 to 2005. The forecast was to sell up to 75,000 Azteks a year. They needed to sell 30,000 to break even. Their biggest year, they only sold 27,322 vehicles.

There were many complaints: it was too expensive, it was marketed as a sport utility vehicle but on its introduction, it only came in 2-wheel drive. It was boring to drive. The biggest complaint, though, was its looks. [Time Magazine](#) called it "deformed and scary." Ironically, though, the people who did buy the car seem to have been quite happy with it, scary looks and all. While the Aztek has had an insurgence as of late, thanks in part to it being driven by the main character in the show *Breaking Bad*, it is partially credited with the downfall of the Pontiac brand.

[One blogger](#) disagrees with the idea that Hackworth was a tyrant and he sees it as a cautionary tale of design by committee. He holds up the example of Steve Jobs as a tyrannical boss who made his company wildly successful. Perhaps with the Aztek, they were trying to be design by committee, but tyranny won.

We don't know whether the Aztek team used Agile methodologies, but regardless of whether Aztek development was a tale of a tyrannical dictator or of a not tyrannical enough CEO, there are lessons that can be learned for any Scrum team. Team leaders should have a goal in mind and not be swayed by any divergent idea, but they should never be dismissive of team members. Team leaders should always listen and attempt to understand complaints, without judging. If the team leader disagrees with the team leader, they should explain why with facts, not emotions.

Remember, a Scrum team should always have clear goals but open communication is key to preventing future Azteks.