



Source: Forbes

BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN YOUR DEVOPS PRACTICE – 3 BACK-TO-BASICS TIPS

👤 Patrick McClory 🕒 February 2, 2016 📁 DevOps 👁 5,619 Views

For many established organizations working to build DevOps culture, it's not uncommon to find that the technical component isn't necessarily the hard part. Whether it's the ups and downs of a highly politicized workplace environment or simply fear of the uncertain and the unknown, technologists are coming to terms with balancing current processes and keeping pace with the needs of the businesses they serve. While this is all fine and good at an academic level, having experienced a healthy dose of empathy through dozens of in-depth consulting engagements and hundreds of deployments, I thought I'd share three fairly basic (and honestly, old) pieces of advice that I find helpful every time I go into a new client meeting or even when I work with my internal teams as we iterate on our own processes.

First, as much as everyone talks about a cultural change, to be successful you have to be able to take advantage of it. Change is hard and change is something that people (in general) struggle. That being said, for professionals in the technology field, our careers are predicated on continual growth and, from a business point of view, being able to capitalize on the new-and-next is critical for both established and emerging businesses who leverage technology. The tact here is simple to state, but difficult to foster: you need to find tangible ways to help your teams connect with the value of the transformation. Be it for their own career growth, the growth in the value of the company's stock, or their innate desire to continue to learn. Whether you focus on the benefit to the individual's growth, the benefit to the company's (and

possibly their own) bottom line, or connecting the journey to the reasons they pursued a career in technology in the first place, getting individuals to connect to the mission at a deep level is critical. ^

As a tangible side note to that idea, in order to connect with individuals, the organization needs to be able to get people... well... connected. Keeping teams small and in close communication is critical. I find that resources like the Spotify engineering culture (parts 1 and 2) are helpful starting points when thinking about how to organize and keep people connected and in communication. Amazon's two-pizza team concept is also a structure that aims to keep teams small, though their focus is a little different. In both cases, being able to establish a set of tight-knit teams focused on delivering products is a huge advantage when trying to keep people connected to the mission of the organization. More on that subject another time!

Just as there was a time when it was hard to believe we'd cross over the Atlantic, build something that could fly, or break the sound barrier, we have to identify those artificially created barriers to excellence and start thinking about how to eliminate doubt and deliver unexpected results. Focusing on eliminating Werner Vogels', the CTO of Amazon, infamous 'undifferentiated heavy lifting' can be a boon here as removing manual, repetitive, and human error-susceptible tasks can get your team focused on things that are differentiating for the organization. 'Breaking the engineering sound barrier' comes in many forms, but try starting with small wins and iterating quickly. I find that looking for the feature, tool, or even process that everyone believes "can't happen here" is often a good target and can start with things as simple as establishing standards that remove ambiguity and promote the right pattern towards the path of least resistance.

At the risk of coming across as overly optimistic, the reality is that you don't have to solve the hardest problems first, nor do you need to solve all of it at once. I've found it useful to look at the problem I'm trying to solve as the vehicle to establishing the right patterns and behaviors for the team. Realistically, implementing a given 'hard thing' isn't impossible, but getting the team to be able to reach further the next time they're presented with an 'impossible problem' allows for greater opportunity to make innovative leaps forward more often.

Know when to get some help. Just as it's not advisable to perform dental surgery on yourself, there are some areas of this transformative process that go much more smoothly with a 'DevOps Sherpa' to help point the way and carry the load when the going gets tough. In those times, where you lean on and leverage

partners, other business units, or even 3rd party tools, it's important to take a serious look at whether you want to, or should, jump back in the drivers' seat at the first possible moment. In my years of consulting, I've seen many organizations realize that they can achieve greater focus, output, and productivity when they're able to find partners who specialize in things that aren't differentiating to their business and don't add direct value to their organization. Where you can leverage other people, processes, or technology to reduce the resistance or friction of change, you're opening up an opportunity to drive real value; that of leveling up your team(s).

It's a strategic differentiator to our business that we both have this competency and that we continue to grow and iterate on it. Our customers see this as a great benefit both that they can leverage our economy of scale from a financial and operations point of view, but that they can also seek out advice from experts in the field whenever it's needed. I think that it's fairly obvious, but to reinforce the point, it's important to build intentional relationships with trusted advisors who can both give great advice in the context of your business and also help with the heavy lifting when push comes to shove.

I know I'm biased both in terms of who I work with today and who I've worked for and with in the past. All of that aside and luckily for most of us, the reality is that many tried-and-true transformation tactics continue to be massively effective when put through the proper contextual lens. The other major truism in this scenario is that technology is ever changing. Rather than focus on arriving at a destination of having 'achieved DevOps,' I tend to focus much more on establishing a direction and momentum that navigates through those critical points that I can see today, but leaves open the likely scenario that tomorrow there will be new technologies and techniques to leverage. Keeping all of that in the context of your organization's core mission is hard and, often times, going back to basics can help bring clarity when transitioning to a new way of doing things.

»