Leveraging Your Team's Expertise to Create an Environment of Collaboration and Critical Thinking

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Leading a large department in today's fast-paced environment is challenging. Being innovative is even more so. To ensure the continued success of the Cricket brand, my burgeoning team had to build an IT structure for future competition—quickly. To do this, we created a highly scalable yet nimble, IT structure able to adapt to the ever-changing competition in the lightning-fast technological industry.

When I rejoined Cricket Wireless after another assignment within AT&T, I was looking at a team that was ten times the size it once was. Now that we are much larger, we have the benefits of a large team, which provides sheer manpower and valuable collective experience. Yet, that kind of significant change in numbers can work against creating and maintaining a culture with a startup's mentality. To stay ahead of the technological curve, my team must embrace the nimble, startup mentality usually reserved for companies with fewer than 10 people.

How did we successfully keep things moving with so many people and moving parts? How did I keep all the players heading in the right direction together while also maintaining and increasing team momentum and morale?

If you can foster an environment with a culture that resembles a startup, you can supercharge your operations. At Cricket Wireless, we broke the big team into smaller teams and kept communication open among and between teams. We did this through macro-level learning, leveraging team players and ensuring morale is high.

Creating this kind of culture starts with laying a foundation. At the beginning, it is crucial to level-set to ensure the team understands every player's role and what they need to accomplish as a collective to win the game. Once everyone is on board, we can shift players around to ensure that we're not working in a vacuum. Fresh eyes can bring a solution that others may not have considered. And finally, with the entire team playing to win together, we need to take a break and appreciate each other for a job well done.

Fostering these teams and creating an environment of collaboration and critical thinking is essential. At Cricket, this foundation is a huge factor in the success we're experiencing in a highly competitive environment.

Back to Class

As a group, we start on the macro level to ensure everyone involved in the project understands the end-to-end architecture. We do this by hosting a "release design review," where we make sure that everyone involved in the project understands his or her role in the development of a single application in the overall customer experience.

These design reviews provide a classroom to give everyone involved the training and teaching they need about the critical aspects of the business and technology as well as the reasonable-risk tolerance for each piece. The reviews also ensure we reinforce how this work will affect the customer experience, which is always top of mind. We often spend hours discussing each decision

before deciding to move forward.

To continue evolving our team culture of excellence, we also implemented a great idea submitted by our employees—history lessons. These "listening and learning sessions" include stories from the past about how we built a particular application. The discussions incorporated the decisions and tradeoffs made building Cricket from the ground up to help everyone better understand risk tolerance and trade-off.

In addition to keeping a keen eye on the customer experience, we also focus on the data to lead us in the right direction. We look at everything, including customer impact, performance and throughput numbers related to the project. Decisions are then made based on data, not just opinions.

Trading Places

Trading players isn't something that just happens in sports. Small teams tend to be more cohesive than large companies, so to keep the larger organization nimble, you need to constantly create and recreate small teams. At the same time, these smaller teams need to not only understand the overall team goals but also to understand each other. We created these cross-functional teams by leveraging the expertise of players on each team and then trading them regularly. I took a seasoned member of one team and traded him or her with a player on another team. Now each team gains new perspective and information to help make quicker, more informed and overall better decisions.

When you walk in someone else's shoes, it gives the team a commonality, focus and experience that is critical to ensure the team is running on all cylinders and moving in the right direction.

For example, I hosted a bi-weekly stability tiger team, so we could focus on ways to update our processes so that we minimized system outages. To ensure the team was truly set up for success, I swapped a senior member of the Operations and Incident Management team with a member of the Delivery team. This simple change allowed us to gain operational perspective into the design of the delivery systems, instead of just "fixing" it. At the same time, the Delivery team member brought systems perspective to operations with an added delivery discipline to "fixes."

Keeping Morale Up

We give additional focus to the teams by making sure that they are rewarded for their great work as we continue to push for perfection. Recently, we celebrated with cupcakes to mark three weeks of zero operational impacts. It sounds small and simplistic, but the team loved it! Who doesn't love cupcakes? These sorts of celebrations create a culture of positivity.

I also established an internal awards program to recognize the team for a job well done. First, I created the CIO Pinch Hitter award. This award is given to the person who most helps another team or organization, and nominations are made by peers. The kicker is that a person on Team A cannot nominate another Team A member. Team members must nominate someone on Team B or C. This inspires cross-collaboration among teams and, as we say, reminds them to "go the extra smile" to encourage and recognize excellent team spirit. We also have the Security Dragon Slayer award, which is bestowed to someone in the organization who goes above and beyond in helping keep our systems secure.

Last, but certainly not least, is our very successful "listening and learning" series. Each team is encouraged to creatively communicate (via a game, video, music, etc.) how their team operates and contributes to the overall success of the entire organization. These little things keep morale up – and break down organizational walls!

I believe the essence of what we do as an IT organization, and the motto by which I lead, is something I borrowed from tradition through my long Air Force career: "Esprit De Corps." Our team has one common set of goals and one common victory, and that is providing the best IT systems to our customers – both external and internal. We are committed to excellence together!