Table of Contents

How Do I Support My People So They Improve?

You've set the business goals. You've defined the structure. Job done, right?

Even with awareness of Agile practices, you should not expect your Teams to be able to become high performing immediately. For example your Team might not know who the customer is and so will need time to establish the appropriate level of contact. Or your Team might not be able to deliver a running tested system every two weeks and so will need time to reach that goal. Or Team members may never have really worked together (they've been a team in name only) and so have to work through how they become more effective. Or perhaps there are organizational impediments which stop the Team from delivering effectively.

As a leader, you need to help the Team. Firstly, you really have to repeatedly remind the Team about the business goals they have. This not a "once and done" activity. Increasingly they will absorb the goals, recognize that you are serious about them, and they will make progress, provided you help them.

The two basic ways leadership can help Teams is by providing space to improve through experimentation, and by removing organizational impediments that slow or stop their work.

How Do I Help My Team by Removing Systematic Impediments That Slow or Stop Work?

One way leaders can help is by working impediments that slow or stop the Team as they deliver. Teams are expected to identify and work impediments themselves. But sometimes the issue goes beyond the Team's capability. For example, perhaps the Team doesn't have the political clout to work the issue to completion.

As a leader you need to both be seen to want to improve and actively participate in removing these systematic impediments.

A great question for you to ask the Team is:

> "When you last talked about improvements as a Team, what experiments came out, and what issues can I help you with?"

This type of question:

- Stresses your awareness of importance for the Team to take time to focus on improvement
- Sets expectation that the Team will be experimenting
- Establishes the leaders role to take on and work issues that slow or stop the Team but which are beyond the capability of the Team to address.

You can, and should, volunteer to take on a Team's impediments. One perennial complaint of Teams is that they feel like they report on issues "over and over again, but nothing ever changes." This is where you need to step in a lead by example, showing that you are interested in helping. This will also ensure

that you establish you role as the leader.

Now let me tell you this is not going to be easy for you. You can expect to be uncomfortable:

- The issues you will deal with will typically be long standing issues of the organization and will often have political implications that need to be addressed to resolve. This means that you will have to take a professional risk to address some of these impediments.
- You should be very transparent about how these impediments are being resolved. How you work the issues will determine how the Team works the issues. This is leading by example. If you expect your Team to improve, you need to show how you are not only helping then, but also how you are improving how you help them. Track the impediments in a tool, with changes in status, comments, etc. Track metrics like "mean time to resolution" and show improvements. And so on.

How do I Provide Space to My Teams to Improve?

There is no chance of the Team becoming more effective, becoming high performing, unless they take the time to focus on the improvement effort. This means you will need to recognize and support the idea that Team improvement is "real work" as well.

To help establish the right mindset you might want to repeat the mantra:

> "Improving daily work is more important than doing daily work" - Gene Kim, The Phoenix Project

Improvement will take many forms, such as how the Team works together, how they work with their customer, removing impediments they have to delivery, improving how they deploy work, and so on.

For software Teams, one area you should encourage the Team to work is automating their deployment pipeline. If most of the Team's deployment processes are currently manual there is a huge potential for return on investments made here, both in terms of freeing up capacity to do more value added work, and in terms of improving the reliability and quality of the deployment process preventing re-work.

Even small investment can lead to big results. One Team recently invested one hour researching automation of a deployment process which lead to 78 hour saving for that process, or a 780% ROI. Further:

> "In less time than it took to do the work once, they were able to implement automation, so they never have to do it again manually"

While this idea is obvious for software Teams, it should be noted that it is also worth reviewing for non-software Teams. Ask "what is tooling we can bring in to enable use to provide this service better, faster, cheaper?"

This is called "tactical automation." In particular you don't need to wait for the mega-automation project. Space to innovate, willingness to invest, and a little encouragement from you will produce this kind of result.

You will feel uncomfortable because:

- You will need to protect the Team's time to do improvements and not, for example, push more work onto the Team when customers demand for more, more, more features. You have to back your Team up in the face of the rest of the organization's demands on their capacity, so they can improve.
- You have to be OK with the idea that not every experiment will lead to improvement, that some will fail. And you have to be comfortable with potential failure even if you suspect something might not work out; let the Team try it anyway. This allows the Team to maintain responsibility for improvement while fostering true learning.
- You have to trust that continuous, relatively small improvements will lead to big results as a result of compounding (exponential) improvements and so lead to high performance.

To help both you and the Team a great question to ask the Team when they talk about improvements is:

> "How will you know that you have improved?"

This will encourage the Team to generate data and metrics as they are improving and will provide you the data you need to become comfortable and support their efforts.

Want to Know More?

- How Do We Setup An Organizational Impediment Removal System? - SSA

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